

Bulgaria



19		Upper secondary school General (47 %) Vocational (53 %)
18		
17		
16	Compulsory schooling	Lower secondary school (Common track)
15		
14		
13		
12		
11	Primary school (Common track)	
10		
9		
8	Pre-school	
7		
6		
5		
4		
3		

33%

Population aged 25-34 with a tertiary degree ^a

1.4%

Percentage of immigrant stock (% population) ^b

23.8%

Population below the poverty line ^c

14%

Youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) ^d

Average TIMSS/PIRLS scores (4th grade) ^e

Center point: 500

552

515

521

Reading

Math

Science

Average PISA scores (10th grade) ^f

OECD average

420

436

424

487

489

489

Reading

Math

Science

4.1%

public spending in education as a % of GDP ^g

6.6

billions allocated in NPRR ^h

General features

Educational system

School starts at age 7, it is compulsory until the age of 16 and free for everybody.³² It is delivered majorly through the public system (only 2% of students attend private schools.³³) Student population is declining especially in rural areas, given the internal migration of people to cities. As a result of the declining population of Bulgaria throughout the years, over 1000 schools have been closed, mostly in remote areas. Nowadays, roughly 75% of the population under working age is concentrated in urban areas. Tracking into differentiated programs starts earlier than in other OECD countries, when students are 13 years-old and have to choose upper secondary school. Students can choose between (i) a general track and (ii) a vocational track. Even within tracks, schools vary significantly in terms of specific programs offered and quality. Upper secondary school tends to be selective, with societal emphasis on identifying early top-performing students to enroll in most prestigious³⁴.

Among the foreign-born population, the top three nationalities are Russia (17%), Turkey (9%) and Syria (8%), while Ukraine was one of the top three nationalities of newcomers in 2019 (together with Russia and Turkey)³⁵. Bulgaria has a percentage of early school leavers higher than the EU average (12.8% versus in 9.9% 2020) but this is declining in accordance to the EU average (dropout rates in 2019 were respectively 13.9% for Bulgaria and 10.2% for the EU average) and a low percentage of people with tertiary educational attainment (33% versus 40.5% which represents the EU average). The percentage of youths aged 15-29 neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET) is in line with the EU average³⁶.

Governance and funding

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Science (MEYS) in Bulgaria is responsible for the administration of education. It is organized along four levels: national, regional, municipal and school level. Primary and general secondary schools are mainly funded at municipal level, while vocational schools are mainly funded by the state, and the largest share of private spending is dedicated to

higher education. Bulgaria benefits from EU funding schemes such as the Lifelong Learning Programme and the National EU-funded Operative programmes such as the Human Resources Development Operative Programme³⁷. Investment in education and training increased in the past recent year, but still remains low compared to other EU countries.

Performance

Despite the upward trend, the overall level of pupils achieving basic skills is much lower than the OECD average: only 53% in reading, 56% in mathematics and 53% in science (compared to the OECD averages of 77%, 76% and 78%). While performance in reading remained stable throughout PISA editions, it significantly improved in mathematics, although in the last two editions (2018 and 2015) remained stagnant. Performance in science worsened, with one of the largest drops among all PISA participants from 2015 to 2018.

Girls performed better than boys in reading by 40 score points, in maths they performed similar to boys and in science they outperformed boys by 15 points³⁸.

The gap in performance between socioeconomically disadvantaged and advantaged students is 106, much larger than the OECD average of 89 points. 6% of disadvantages students scored in the top quarter for reading, a lower number compared to the OECD average of 11%. Socio-economic status explained 14% of the variation in performance in mathematics and 16% in science (OECD average: 14% for maths and 13 % for science).

Absenteeism is higher than OECD average: 44% of students missed a day of school in the two weeks prior to the PISA test and 34% of students reported being bullied at least a few times a month, compared to 23% on average across OECD countries³⁹. This percentage is much higher than the average in other EU countries (22.1%).

The gender gap in career expectations is predominant among high-achieving students, especially in health-related professions and ICT, where respectively 25% and 3% of girls expecting to work there, compared to 14% and 17% of boys.

Willingness to go to university is much lower

³²<https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/bulgaria/overview>

³³OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education : Bulgaria

³⁴Key features of the educational system - Bulgaria

³⁵International Migration Outlook - Bulgaria, OECD (2021)

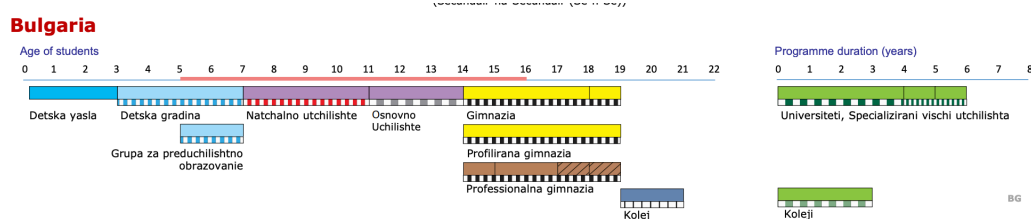
³⁶Bulgaria Education and Training Monitor 2021

³⁷<https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/bulgaria/funding-education>

³⁸https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/PISA2018_CN_BGR.pdf

³⁹https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/PISA2018_CN_BGR.pdf

Figure 1.3: Educational system in Bulgaria



among high-achieving disadvantaged students: a high percentage (50%) expected not to complete tertiary education, compared to roughly 20% of the advantaged students.

Key policy challenges

The inequality of access, variable quality across locations and education tracks, and early tracking of students that leads to extensive social and ethnic segregation are the primary problems in Bulgarian education.⁴⁰ Moreover, tertiary educational attainment is below the EU average (40.5%) and the EU target⁴¹. Participation of students from disadvantaged socio-economic background is lower⁴².

In recent years, the government tried to tackle the problem of early school dropouts by running a large-scale campaign to identify non-attending children of mandatory school age (up to age 16). Despite these efforts, Bulgaria still had a high percentage of early leavers from education and training in 2019, the fourth highest in EU.⁴³

An ageing teachers body and teachers training characterised by insufficient digital skills and a high degree of theory at the expense of pedagogical practice represent another crucial policy challenge in Bulgaria.⁴⁴

Recently enacted policies and investments

Participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds is low, despite the higher levels of socio-economic development achieved in the past years⁴⁵. In this respect, Bulgaria has implemented the EU-funded project “Active inclusion in pre-school education” that finances care-related fees for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, parental education programs and pedagogical support for children.

To tackle the declining enrolment rate for children aged 4 to the starting age of compulsory primary school, the age of compulsory pre-school education was lowered from 5 to 4 from September 2020⁴⁶

To improve access to tertiary education, students from disadvantaged backgrounds received targeted support from the ESF+ from 2014 to 2020. The same funds have been continued in the 2021-2027 programming period.⁴⁷

€748 million of the 6.27 billions in the Recovery and Resilience Plan in Bulgaria are dedicated to education. The Plan supports the following strategic areas: (i) the modernisation of educational institutions’ infrastructure (ii) a comprehensive education reform (iii) the efficient policy coordination in all phases of research and innovation (iv) the support to research and innovation performance of public research institutions and innovative business⁴⁸.

⁴⁰<https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/BGR>

⁴¹45% of population with tertiary attainment by 2030

⁴²EU Country Report, Bulgaria

⁴³<https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/BGR>

⁴⁴Education and Training Monitor 2020

⁴⁵<https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/81d18411-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/81d18411-en>

⁴⁶<https://www.unicef.org/serbia/en/reports/monitoring-framework-inclusive-education-serbia>

⁴⁷EU Country Report, Bulgaria

⁴⁸https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/recoveryandresilience_bulgaria_factsheet_en.pdf