

PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CASE OF BULGARIA

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Abstract

Higher education plays an important role in sustainable development. Universities across the globe have the potential to significantly contribute to progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by implementing sustainability practices on their campuses and through their educational programmes. Concerning this and against the background of a constantly declining number of students in Bulgaria, this paper seeks to analyse the Bulgarian higher education institutions' role in promoting sustainable development. It argues that most of the existing bachelor's and master's programmes intended to be related to sustainable development, are not clearly associated with the SDGs and taught in Bulgarian language only, which hinders the opportunities for both the achievement of the Global goals and for the improvement of the country's higher education system. The paper therefore concludes that an adequate approach for Bulgarian universities to properly promote sustainable development is through launching international programmes targeting both Bulgarian and foreign students as well as through incorporating the SDGs into most disciplines.

Keywords: sustainable development, sustainable development goals, higher education, SDGs, universities

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education is of great importance in today's world in political, economic, social and cultural terms. Simpson (2013) notes that while some regard it as a tool for producing intellectual and moral human beings, other focus on its relevance to students in terms of both their preparation for the needs of the economic context and their introduction to the responsibilities of civic life. In fact, the Strategy for the Development of Higher Education (SDHE) in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2030 considers higher education to be key to effectively solving major societal problems and challenges by applying an expert approach to decision-making and policy formulation and implementation (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria 2020). This is expected to occur through either new knowledge generation or use of available knowledge to develop innovations and competitive technologies, forming an entrepreneurial spirit and helping companies, administration and politicians to solve the challenges they face in an adequate and scientifically based approach (Ibid.).

Similarly, higher education is essentially important for all three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental, and respectively for achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and associated 169 targets, announced in the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. Expectedly, in recent years sustainable development has found a particular place in the higher education system. Universities contribute to sustainability through the adoption of various declarations and strategies which they commit to follow not only within their campuses but also at the national and international levels (Ferrer-Balas et al. 2009). They help in advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through (1) education and training of the necessary human capital with a particular focus on the SDGs, (2) research and (3) implementing the agenda itself (Duran/United Nations n.d.). Nowadays, bachelor's and master's programmes focus on the importance of sustainable development, faculty staff is expected to do research on related topics and publish and disseminate it, while administrative personnel guarantee that the given higher education institution (HEI) is sustainable (McCowan 2020). Put in simple terms, the idea of sustainable development has transcended the boundaries of geography textbooks and UN-based declarations and moved to the centre of universities' strategies and rhetoric (McCowan 2023).

The situation described above, however, differs across countries and regions depending on political, economic and social developments apart from the particular aspects of the given higher education system. In this sense, the current paper tries to answer the question whether the universities in Bulgaria meaningfully promote sustainable development and the SDGs achievement or rather they try to seize a mainly economic opportunity by attracting students in a context characterized by a constantly decreasing number of Bulgarian students and strong competition at both the national and international levels.

This paper is based on publicly available data only, including the 2023 edition of the rating system of higher education institutions in Bulgaria and relevant information from the summer 2024/2025 admission campaign in the Bulgarian universities.

2. THE HIGHER EDUCATION-SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT NEXUS IN THE LITERATURE

As noted in the introduction, higher education is at the basis of achieving sustainable development and the SDGs. This is acknowledged in both international policy documents and the research literature. While higher education generally regards all of the Global goals, two targets under SDG 4 address it directly. According to the first one (4.3), equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university should be ensured by year 2030. The second target (4.b) states that by year 2020 the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular, the least developed ones globally, for enrolment in higher education in developed countries and other developing countries should be substantially expanded (United Nations 2015). Concerning this, Ashida (2023, pp. 71-72) notes that target 4.b was specifically established to adequately support the implementation of target 4.3 through the increase of the number of scholarships for students from developing countries to pursue a higher education degree.

Various EU policy documents also highlights the importance of higher education in advancing sustainable development and the SDGs. For example, in 2019 it was launched the European Universities initiative which is aimed, among other things, at transforming “higher education institutions into the universities of the future with structural, systemic and sustainable impact” (European Commission 2024). As of 31 July 2024, a total of 64 alliances have been created between HEIs from 35 countries within the initiative, with 13 Bulgarian universities being part of such alliances (Ibid.). In addition, the 2022 European Strategy for Universities recognises the crucial role of HEIs in helping societies address adequately the impact of climate change, and live in a more sustainable and socially responsible way, contributing to the SDGs achievement (European Commission 2022). For this purpose, it aims to support and enable universities to adapt to the changing environment, including in terms of providing the necessary green and digital skills to students and staff.

Again in 2022, the Council of the European Union made several recommendations to the member states in terms of learning for the green transition and sustainable development, including at the higher education level, and in accordance with institutional autonomy and academic freedom (Council of the European Union 2022). Among these is the provision of support (through funding as well) for programmes and learning courses aimed at promoting green transition and sustainable development, including sustainability innovation and entrepreneurship (Ibid.).

At the same time, many studies also highlight the relationship between sustainable development and higher education. Žalėnienė and Pereira (2021) state that sustainability is based on the creation of new ideas and technologies which are normally promoted through higher education. Hinduja et al. (2023) point out, that universities usually undertake certain initiatives aimed at, for example, making their campuses greener, or at including some sustainability issues into their curricula. Although the latter often concerns a particular educational topic and its relevance to a given SDG, other scholars note that universities can play an essential role in achieving all the SDGs. For example, McCowan (2016), among others, regard higher education not only as a key component for the SDG 4 achievement, but also as an essential tool for achieving the rest of the Global goals. Liu and Kitamura (2019, p. 64) note that the important role of higher education in achieving sustainable development comes from generating the necessary knowledge, technology and innovation, which in many cases is conducted through

cooperating with businesses and communities. Sachs et al. (2024, pp. 4-5) even argue that “the single most important investment of all is education which applies to the poorest nations as well”, as in a context where we put together higher education and a supportive business and regulatory environment many other positive outcomes follow: “improved technologies, better decision making, healthier and more satisfying lives, and the ability of economies to attract domestic and international business investments” (Ibid.).

Still, some would contest the relevance of sustainable development topic to particular courses. For instance, Ivanova (2023, p. 409) indicates that some scholars are concerned that the inclusion of sustainability into tourism-oriented curricula could hamper standard tourism business and management content. While such attitudes and perceptions may not necessarily regard the whole university, but just one or a few departments, they still have the potential to negatively affect new ideas and innovations. As McCowan (2023) rightfully notes, the multiplicity and fragmentation within a university hinders the achievement of a unified aim, whereas adopting or promoting an external goal or values is hindered by existing internal shared beliefs and myths. With regards to this, Finnveden and Schneider (2023) note that universities need to provide students with some comprehensive sustainable development associated skills, even if the latter are not aimed to be professionally involved in the sustainable development field. In this case, they outline “four major groups of necessary sustainability skills: critical thinking about complex issues, articulating sustainability issues, understanding megatrends and global drivers, and literacy on crucial sustainability issues” (Ibid.). Partially this matter can be attributed to the relation that HEIs have with the SDGs achievement. Concerning this, McCowan (2016, p. 511) notes that the universities vary significantly according to the linkage they have with the outside world, that is, whether external actors are involved in their activities and whether they provide actors and ideas to the society or the other way around.

3. CURRENT STATE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN BULGARIA

Although in Bulgaria the interests towards sustainable development has increased in recent years, the topic has still not gained the necessary attention in the country and consequently in the higher education curricula. Nonetheless, as in many other countries across the world, the Bulgarian HEIs promote, to varying degrees, sustainable development through their operations in campus and education programmes and research.

3.1. Sustainable development in campus

Perhaps it would not be far from the truth if we say that as of now it is easier for universities in Bulgaria to promote the achievement of the SDGs through policies and practices within their campuses than through their curricula. On the one hand, this is understandable given that visible results are achievable in a relatively short time and they are perceived and appreciated by students and society. For example, in 2023 the University of National and World Economy (UNWE) constructed two photovoltaic installations that are now expected to produce more than 50% of its energy consumption yearly (UNWE 2023). In addition, the implementation of the projects “Smart Lighting for Power Saving” and “Smart Home” within the university campus should contribute to the sustainable green environment through energy efficiency and power and cost savings” (Ibid.).

Other universities have endorsed their own strategies for achieving sustainable development. For example, the Strategy of Sofia University for Achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2022-2027) highlights the strong relevance of the university activities to SDG 4, SDG 8, SDG 9 and SDG 17 (Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski 2023). Likewise, the Strategy for Sustainable Development of Technical University – Sofia (2023 – 2030) takes into account a self-evaluation of the university’s role in achieving the 17 SDGs, indicating its direct and indirect impact in this regard, and outlining the planned activities within the university campus in terms of achieving sustainable development (Technical University of Sofia 2024). All these measures are in line with the 2022 European strategy for universities, which highlights that in terms of environmental sustainability HEIs can be seen as a good role model due to the implementation of such practices in their campuses and activities (European

Commission 2022). It should also be noted that when it comes to promoting sustainable development through the practical implementation of certain policies within university campuses, the role of other stakeholders such as the business, should be taken into account.

3.2. Sustainable development in curricula

While sustainable development measures in campus are often easier to be implemented and subsequently appreciated by various stakeholders, creating and launching successful higher education programmes focused on sustainable development and the SDGs may turn to be more difficult.

Currently, in Bulgaria there exist a number of bachelor's and master's degree programmes in sustainable development related topics. Table 1 below presents those HEIs that as of 31 July 2024 offer programmes that include "sustainable development" in their title or are clearly linked to sustainable development, by focusing on environmental or climate associated issues. The table does not include data regarding military or medical universities, nor the police academy due to their specific profile.

Table 1. Number of bachelor's and master's programmes in sustainable development offered by Bulgarian universities

University	Type	Number of current students in 2023	Number of bachelor's programmes	Number of master's programmes
Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"	State	19 167	2	2
Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv	State	16 226	2	4
University of National and World Economy	State	14 358	1	3
South-West University "Neofit Rilski"	State	6 414	1	4
New Bulgarian University	Private	5 927	1	2
Trakia University - Stara Zagora	State	5 885	1	2
Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen	State	5 620	2	-
„Angel Kanchev” University of Ruse	State	5 154	1	1
Prof. Dr. Assen Zlatarov University - Burgas	State	2 973	1	1
Technical University of Gabrovo	State	2 551	-	1
University of Forestry	State	1 723	1	1
Agricultural University – Plovdiv	State	1 716	2	3
University of Chemical Technology and Metallurgy	State	1 442	3	1
University of Mining and Geology “St. Ivan Rilski”	State	1 158	1	2
Higher School of Insurance and Finance	Private	580	-	1
Total		95 900	19	28

Source: *Bulgarian University Ranking System 2023 and author's calculations based on data from the summer 2024/2025 universities' admission campaign in Bulgaria*

Some clarifications need to be made. Many of the programmes indicated in Table 1 were launched in recent years, including those of them that have a clear focus on sustainable development and some of the SDGs. This in turn leads to the question whether these programmes will prove successful based on sufficient teaching capacity and well-constructed curricula, or they rather emerge in response to trends used by universities to attract students against the background of a very competitive environment and decreasing total number of the latter on a national scale (Figure 1).

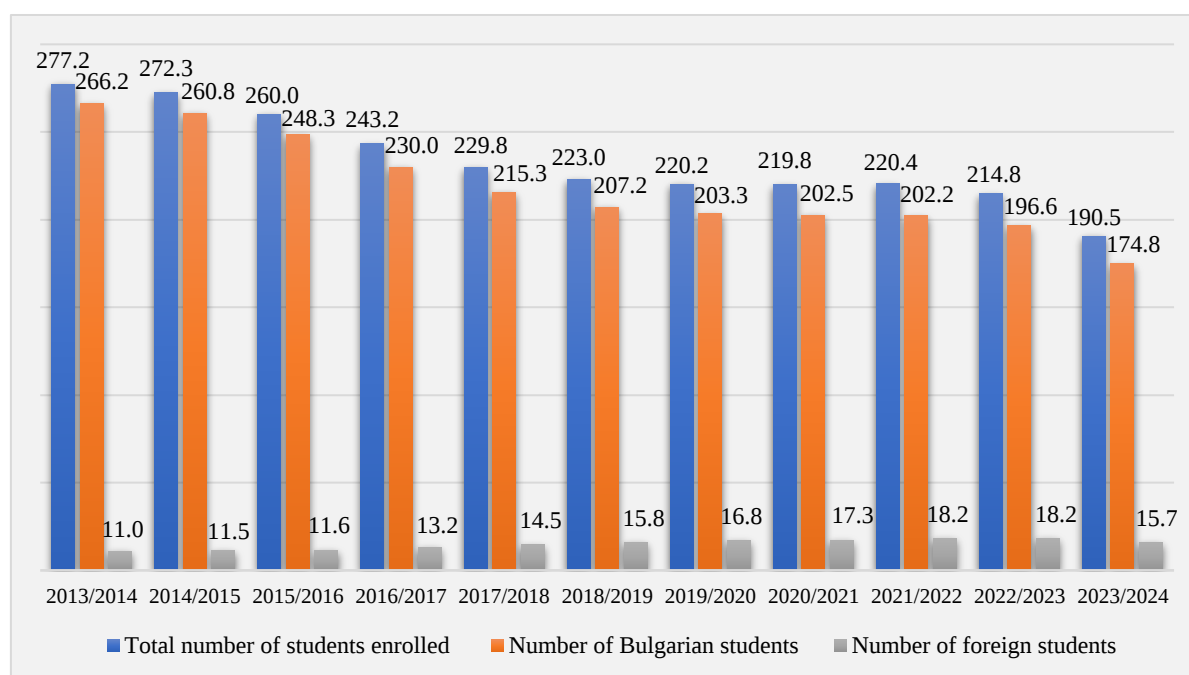


Figure 1. Number of students enrolled in HEIs in Bulgaria between academic years 2013/2014 and 2023/2024 (in thousands*)

Source: National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria 2024

*The data is rounded to the nearest 10

Figure 1 reveals that while the total number of students enrolled in HEIs in Bulgaria has been declining for years, with more than a 30% decrease between 2013 and 2023, the number of foreign students has been generally rising. Concerning the latter, the number of foreign students has risen not only as an absolute number, but it more than doubled as a share of the total number of students: from 3,97% in 2013 to 8,24%. It should also be indicated that the majority of foreign students are enrolled in specific universities, with the medical ones topping the rankings (Bulgarian University Ranking System 2023).

4. DISCUSSION

While the number of bachelor's and master's programmes in sustainable development and related topics can be perceived as an important feature of the Bulgarian universities' awareness of the importance of sustainable development, other things should be noted. Roughly 30 of all 47 programmes indicated in Table 1 contain in their titles the term "ecology" or other similar word, that is, to a large extent they focus on environmental protection. However, in most cases they are not explicitly associated with the achievement of the SDGs. In fact, only a few of these programs are directly related to the Global Goals. Among the possible reasons for this can be indicated the lack of sufficient capacity within just one university, the lack of up-to-date course content and the underestimated importance of achieving the SDGs on a national scale. In addition, all of the programmes indicated in Table 1 are entirely taught in

Bulgarian, which significantly limits the possibility for foreign academic staff to be involved in teaching activities, as well as for foreign students to be respectively enrolled in a given programme, which has the potential to increase the quality of the given programme and its relevance.

Put it simple terms, promoting sustainable development through higher education in Bulgaria is expectedly associated with certain challenges and opportunities.

4.1. Challenges

Universities are in a competitive environment. Many of them compete with each other both nationally and internationally. This also applies to a number of Bulgarian universities, regardless of the fact that most of their programs are taught in Bulgarian. In fact, the SDHE 2021-2030 notes that a main challenge to the Bulgarian higher education system is the strong competition from HEIs in other EU member states against a backdrop of misunderstanding and no yearning among many Bulgarian universities for developing a higher degree of international competitiveness, as they were for a long time in a comfortable situation defined by the national competitive academic environment (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria 2020, p. 19). Not surprisingly, the number of Bulgarian prospective students seeking higher education abroad increased after Bulgaria's accession to the EU. Although no official data in Bulgaria is released in terms of their number, estimated data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics may serve as a reference point (see Figure 2).

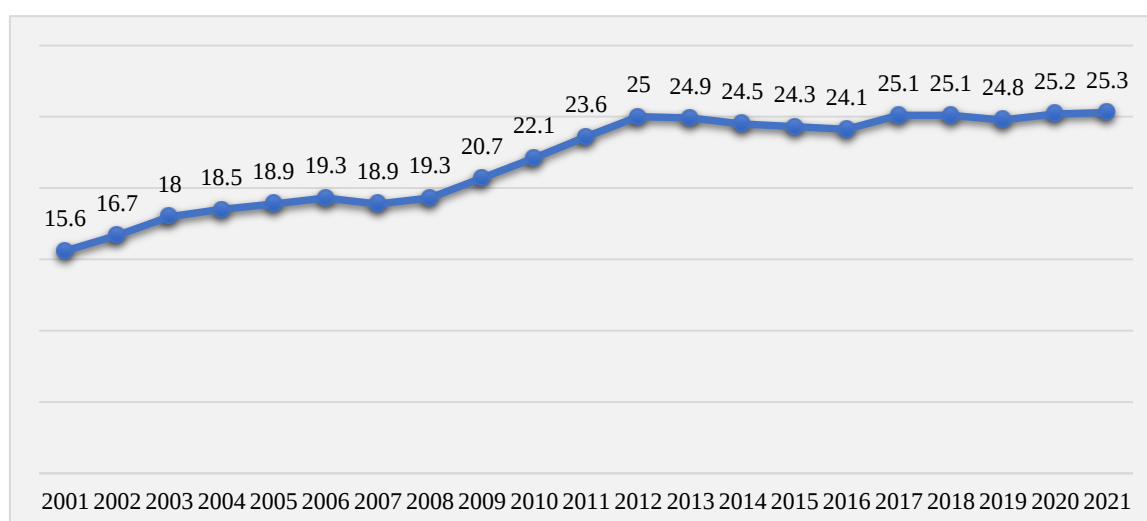


Fig. 2. Outbound internationally mobile students between 2001 and 2021 (in thousands)

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

There was a 60% increase between 2001 and 2012, while between 2012 and 2021 (the last year for which data are presented) their number remained roughly constant, equating to approximately 25 000, which can also be interpreted as a lack of trust in the quality of the Bulgarian higher education system among many Bulgarian students and their families. Compared to the constantly declining number of students in Bulgaria, these numbers are all the more important. In other words, higher education institutions in Bulgaria, especially those perceived as being of a higher status among them, have the opportunity to retain some of those who leave the country for the purpose of education, but for this purpose they need to undertake the necessary changes to achieve the quality of education.

Perhaps these trends are not that surprising in light of others related to higher education, as some data suggest. For example, the level of attainment at this educational level remains low compared to the EU average, as in 2022 some 33.8% of the Bulgarian citizens aged 25-34 had a higher education degree, an increase of 6.6. points in comparison with 2012, but still below the EU average of 42.0% (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture 2023, pp. 12-13). Also, there

is still a significant gap between men and women when it comes to a completed higher education: respectively 27.7% of the former compared to 40.3% of the latter. At the same time, those graduated in science, technology and engineering are roughly one fifth (20.3%) of all graduates compared to the EU average of 25.4% (Ibid.). What is more, in 2018-2022 the number of students enrolled has decreased distinctly in some programmes that could play an important role in Bulgaria's green transition: a 28.8% decrease of those enrolled in environmental programmes, an 11.6% decrease in biology and an 8.8% decrease in physical, chemical and earth sciences (Ibid.). At the same time, the data reveal that the numbers sharply increased in other bachelor's programmes such as, for example, education (25.2%) and information and communication technology (19.5%) The latter trend can be seen, respectively, in the light of the increased salaries in the basic and high schools and the higher payment in the IT sector in respect to other fields.

Insufficient language training among Bulgarian academic staff has been identified as a factor that limits the development of programs and courses in foreign languages (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria 2020).

When it comes to new higher educational programmes focused particularly on the achievement of sustainable development and the SDGs, their launching, as in the case of other programmes, may be influenced by a host of factors. For example, political and economic uncertainties in recent years have made sustainable development not a very popular topic among many political actors and citizens. A survey conducted by the European Investment Bank indicates that Bulgarians are primarily concerned with economic and financial challenges, and while being relatively aware of the causes and consequences of climate change, they have significantly less knowledge of the actions that can help mitigate its negative impact (European Investment Bank 2024).

It is to be noted that even the relationship between university and society may influence the choice of programmes to be launched within a university. Concerning this, one may argue that nowadays in Bulgaria is widely accepted the perception that the impact of higher education on society is insignificant, or at least unclear and therefore neglected. This, however, applies to other countries as well. As Ashida (2023, pp. 71-72) notes, the interactions between universities and society and the former's impact on the latter still need to be understood properly, both from analytical and normative points of view. Yet, there are some tools which can help one to better assess the impact of a given university on society, including in terms of the SDGs. For example, the Times Higher Education (THE) issues the so-called Impact Rankings, which is the only ranking in the world to assess universities' contribution to the 17 UN SDGs. A total 2 152 universities from 125 countries are ranked in THE's Impact Rankings 2024, and four of them are Bulgarian universities (Times Higher Education 2024).

With the above in mind, many universities follow a pattern of launching programmes focused on topics important for state and society at the given moment. While such programmes may be indeed necessary to meet the demand and indeed in a line with university strategic documents, in terms of many HEIs it remains unclear to what extent the emergence of similar programmes derives from purely a competitive point of view and whether they include the required quality of teaching staff and curricula. Actually, there exist the possibility bachelor's and master's programmes in sustainable development to be launched by many universities across the country, without, however, guaranteeing that the necessary resources, including the quality of teaching staff and expertise, are provided. Concerning this, according to data from the 2023 edition of the Bulgarian university rating system, in the academic 2022/2023 the Bulgarian universities offered several bachelor's and master's programmes that were partially titled sustainable development in their titles were offered by Bulgarian universities in the academic 2022/2023 (Bulgarian University Ranking System 2023), however, are not among the programmes offered in the 2024/2025 admission campaign. Therefore, some answers to the above-posted questions can be obtained after a certain period of time through metrics such as the number/ratio of realizations in the specific sector, surveys among students, teachers and employers. Until then, the risk remains that students enrolled in such programs will not get the necessary knowledge and access to innovations and technologies (if any), which may lead to the failure and consequently to the closure of the programme.

According to Ferrer-Balas et al. (2009, p. 1080), in order to avoid such practices from implementing, it is necessary that certain university internal features such as existing culture, structure and management

processes, and technology be properly addressed, otherwise a deep and lasting change could not be achieved. Overcoming all the obstacles mentioned so far takes a lot of time and effort from all participants in the sustainable development process. Achieving essential changes in cultural beliefs and ethical norms is a difficult task, especially in academia. It requires persistence in action and an emphasis on the positive aspects of change for individuals and society as a whole. A key point is the realization that achieving sustainable deployment in universities is not a one-time act, but a complex process of change that requires a significant amount of time (Kondev 2015, pp. 15-16).

4.2. Opportunities

As of now, Bulgaria is still not on track to achieve the SDGs by 2030, especially SDG 4, although some of the targets under this goal represent a great opportunity for the country to seize certain benefits. This regards mainly targets 4.7. and 4.b. The former states *“By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development”* (United Nations 2024). In its turn, target 4.b states that *“by 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries”* (Ibid.). Translated into the local context in Bulgaria and the current demographic trends, this target represents an opportunity for the country, and for its higher education system in particular, as it may provide the necessary impetus for more universities to take imperative measures to raise the quality and internationalize more of their programmes. Hence, this may boost the interest among third country nationals, and not only, to pursue a higher education degree in Bulgaria.

Promoting the achievement of sustainable development in the broader sense, and selected SDGs in the narrow sense, will contribute to overcoming some of the main challenges facing higher education in Bulgaria and described in the SDHE 2021-2030. Among these are lagging behind trends in European higher education; weak internationalization of Bulgarian higher education; lack of clarity in the strategic visions of HEIs concerning their main functions related to education and training, development of fundamental and applied scientific research, innovation and entrepreneurial skill, as well as to their social responsibilities. In other words, promoting sustainable development and the SDGs through bachelor’s and master’s programmes will contribute to achieving several of the specific goals for the development of higher education by 2030 set in the SDHE 2021-2030, namely: (1) increasing the competitiveness of Bulgarian higher education institutions at the national and international level, particularly if used from a strategic marketing point of view in campaigns aimed to attract Bulgarian students seeking education abroad; (2) greater internationalization of Bulgarian higher education; (3) overcoming some of the critical attitudes among Bulgarians towards the national higher education system, such as regarding its quality and its usefulness for the country, the world and society; (4) adequate inclusion of the Bulgarian higher education in the development of economic centres within the country; (5) improving the quality of higher education by modernizing the content, methods and forms of education.

Bulgaria has not yet fully exploited the opportunities offered by one particular advantage of its higher education system. Unlike many “elite” universities in the USA and in the United Kingdom, which use their high tariffs in a marketing strategy as a quality indicator of their programmes (Coulson et al. in Waller et al. 2017), most of the Bulgarian universities do not have such high fees, which is an advantage when it comes to ensuring equal access to all. What is more, they can also offer cheap accommodation to most of their students, an important feature that should not be underestimated in a highly competitive environment. However, with most of the programmes taught entirely in Bulgarian language, the possibilities to attract foreign students, and consequently foreign lecturers and researchers remain low. This applies to the fullest extent to higher education programmes in sustainable development. Therefore, the HEIs in Bulgaria should focus on internationalization in developing long-lasting sustainable development programmes in line with the SDGs and the demographic trends, while advancing in the

quality of education they provide. This means that the universities should aim to attract both foreign students and academics and not only because such measures are part of strategic documents at the national, regional and global levels. The internationalization brings distinguishable benefits to all stakeholders, including the HEI themselves, as it increases their competitiveness, especially when it comes to topics of international relevance.

Promoting the SDGs achievement and respectively sustainable development can be implemented also through joint international programmes with universities at the regional level. As a matter of fact, the Operational plan for the implementation of SDHE 2021-2030 aims to internationalize the social and educational environment in HEIs in Bulgaria to attract a greater number of foreign students through various measures such as double and joint educational programs between Bulgarian and foreign HEIs (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021).

Nonetheless, some may indicate as an alternative to this the launching of joint bachelor's and master's programmes between two or more Bulgarian universities, as attracting foreign academic staff has the potential to become a bone of contention within universities in structure and management terms. In other words, the comfortable situation defined by the national competitive environment, does not apply to the universities only, but to the faculty personnel as well. Still, a number of establish joint bachelor's and master's programmes in various topics between HEIs in Bulgaria in recent years have not proven to be a successful alternative to internationalization. Besides, the internationalization should be conducted in cooperation with national and international accreditation agencies and possibly, with the support of recognized national and international organization working in the sustainable development field. For example, in terms of the latter, since the end of 2022, in Bulgaria has been operating a national Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN Bulgaria). It is aimed at developing and providing a leading SDGs platform in Bulgaria for universities, research institutes, business, central and local government bodies and civil society organizations, empowering all members and partners to act for a sustainable future and impact society as a whole (SDSN Bulgaria 2023). As of 31 July 2024, six Bulgarian universities are members of the Network. In short, the opportunities to the HEIs in Bulgaria to develop well-structured and high quality ensured programmes do exist. It remains only for them to realize today's national and global realities and take the necessary steps towards adequately promoting sustainable development.

5. CONCLUSION

The importance of sustainable development and the SDGs suggest that higher education institutions should be actively involved in their achievement through the development of the necessary human resources. The Bulgarian universities do not make an exception in this regard, but due to the existing demographic trends and the perceived low quality of higher education in Bulgaria as a whole, they face particular challenges. Based on analysis on the trends and challenges in question, this paper indicates the internationalization of bachelor's and master's degree programmes as an adequate approach to meaningfully promote sustainable development. On the one hand, this will increase the visibility of the given HEI, while on the other it will create opportunities to attract both foreign students and academics, and thus the quality of the Bulgarian higher education system.

At the same time, this paper has certain limitations. It does not take into consideration bachelor's and master's programmes that are remotely linked to sustainable development or such which suggest that lecturers may indeed teach sustainable development related issues, but which are not included officially in the curricula. Also, as many Bulgarian HEIs are indeed involved in collaboration with their foreign counterparts, this may have an impact on the former when it comes to promoting sustainable development through their campuses and educational programmes. Therefore, future research may try to find out whether and how university alliances affect individual members' activities in addressing sustainable development, that is, if the latter are more committed to promoting sustainable development individually or through collaborations.

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