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*The Secondary Education Reform in Ukraine:  
Moving to the EU Standards*

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Reforma szkolnictwa średniego na Ukrainie: dążenie do standardów UE

STRESZCZENIE

Celem artykułu jest porównanie charakteru reform strukturalnych na Ukrainie na poziomie średnim z reformami w Unii Europejskiej. W XXI w. edukacja w Unii Europejskiej jest postrzegana z punktu widzenia budowania społeczeństwa opartego na wiedzy, które aktualizuje czas trwania szkolnej edukacji oraz kompetencje obywateli. Reformy rozszerzenia edukacji szkolnej i jej przekształcenie w „kompetencję” obejmują wszystkie państwa członkowskie Unii Europejskiej. Na Ukrainie w ramach integracji europejskiej reformy szkolnego sektora edukacji (struktury i treści) mają na celu synchronizację ukraińskiej edukacji szkolnej ze standardami europejskimi. W związku z tym w opracowaniu określono wyzwania związane z tym procesem i przedstawiono zalecenia.

**Słowa kluczowe:** reforma; edukacja szkolna; Ukraina; integracja europejska; Unia Europejska

SUMMARY

The aim of this paper is to compare the secondary education reforms in Ukraine with reforms in the European Union. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, education in the European Union is viewed from the standpoint of building a knowledge society, which actualizes the duration of school education as well as mastering the competences of its citizens. The reforms of the extension of school education and its transformation into a competence approach are embracing all European Union member states. In Ukraine, within the framework of the European integration, the reforms of school education (of the structure and of the content) are aimed at synchronizing the Ukrainian school

with the European standards. In conclusion, challenges of this process are specified and recommendations are made.

**Keywords:** reform; school education; Ukraine; European integration; European Union

## INTRODUCTION

The European vector of Ukraine's development is defined from the very beginning of the country's existence as an independent state in 1991. The Agreement on Partnership and Cooperation between Ukraine and the European Communities and Their Member States (1994) was the legal basis for the European integration of Ukraine. The Strategy of Integration of Ukraine into the European Union (1998) proclaimed that Ukraine's national interests need Ukraine's integration into the European political, informational, economic and legal space. The Association Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union has finally confirmed the European direction of Ukraine's development. It recognizes that Ukraine as a European country shares the common history and common values with the Member States of the European Union (EU). The document notes the importance that Ukraine attaches to its European identity; stresses the strong public support in Ukraine for the European choice of the country; confirms that the EU recognizes the European aspirations of Ukraine and welcomes its European choice (Association Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union 2014).

The European vector of Ukraine's policy, for the most part of its independence, has contributed to the European orientation of the Ukrainian education. All legislative and strategic documents defining the development of the Ukrainian education declare the integration of the Ukrainian education into the European educational space. For the school education, these are the Laws of Ukraine "On Education" (1991), "On General Secondary Education" (1999), the new Law "On Education" (2017), Education (Ukraine 21<sup>st</sup> Century) State National Programme (1993), the National Doctrine of Education Development (2002) and the National Strategy for the Development of Education in Ukraine until 2021 (2013). To this end, the Ukrainian education is in the process of continuous transformation started with decomunization, bringing up the young generation in the spirit of national and European values.

At the school level, reforms are large-scale covering the transformation of both the structure and the content of school education. Besides, in the framework of the decentralization reform in Ukraine, decentralization in education is also taking place, i.e. a transfer of governance from the national/*oblast* level to the local one, i.e. *rayon* education authorities and/or amalgamated territorial communities (that are currently being established).

The aim of this paper is to compare the secondary education reforms in Ukraine with the reforms in the EU where education is viewed from the stand-

point of building a knowledge society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It actualizes the duration of school education as well as its competences orientation. Obviously, such a comparison is conditional. Firstly, comparable objects are not equivalent: the EU is a supranational entity uniting 28 member states; Ukraine is a separate state; besides it is not a member of the EU and is not directly influenced by its strategies/programmes. Secondly, there is no synchronization in the implementation of reforms – reforms in the EU have been launched much earlier than in Ukraine. Therefore, the analysis actually reflects the impact of EU reforms on the development of school education in Ukraine.

### THE REFORMS OF THE SCHOOL EDUCATION STRUCTURE

In Ukraine, the reform of the extension of the school education duration can be characterized as a problematic one. Its non-linear nature (it has been interrupted after 10 years of its implementation) is one of the indicators of such a problematic character. For the first time the introduction of a 12-year schooling started at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In pursuance of Article 12 of the Law “On General Secondary Education” (1999) and of the Resolution No. 1717 of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine “On the Transfer of General Educational Institutions to New Content, Structure and the 12-Year Period of Education” (2000) a complex of activities was implemented to extend its duration. For the first time, the educational standards of primary and of secondary education were adopted, new curricula and textbooks developed.

It should be stressed that the reform was not limited to a mechanical extension of the school duration. An attempt was made to introduce a new child-centred concept – the lessons were reduced to 35 minutes for first-year pupils, instead of 45, a 12-point assessment system (without negative marks) was introduced, assessment of primary school pupils started at grade 4. The high school was proclaimed profession-oriented, training young people for future careers. However, in 2010, the Ukrainian authorities stopped this process due to the political reasons in view of the eastern vector of the state development. After the Euromaidan (2014) the European-oriented Government has re-started the process of the Ukrainian education harmonisation with the EU standards including introduction of the 12-year period of education.

The problematic character of the 12-year schooling reform should be explained also by the lack of its full support by the Ukrainian society at the start of the second attempt to implement it in 2015. As evidenced by the results of sociological survey, about 70% of the interviewed parents and 68% of teachers respectively were against the extension of the school duration from 10 to 12 years (Foundation “Demokratychni initsiatyvy”, 2015). Partially, it can be explained by the fact that the full secondary education is compulsory under the Constitution of

Ukraine (Article 53) (1996). So, the introduction of a 12-year school extends the obligatory stay in it of the young people up to 18 years of age to get the Secondary Education Certificate.

Another challenge of the reform is its cost-demanding character. Under the situation when the state must ensure accessibility and free-of-charge status of 12-year compulsory education, additional financial resources are needed. This is very difficult for a country with a hard economic situation in view of the war.

At the same time, a 12-year (or longer) secondary school has become an imperative within the EU borders today. It is a product of permanent structural reforms starting from the formation of education systems at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century under development of national states in Europe. In order to provide educational services to the population at large under rapid development of industry and mass resettlement of the population to the cities, education began to turn into a coherent structure, incorporating models of schooling not coordinated to this day. M. Archer describes this process in the *Social Origins of Educational Systems* (1979) as “the unification of various institutions, activities and staff into a single national educational system” (Archer 1979, p. 17).

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, national education systems in Europe – it is referred to a free universal primary education lasting 4–8 years – were formed. Since then, there has been a steady movement towards extending the duration of schooling. By completing the formation of universal systems of primary education, the European countries switched to their transformation into the secondary education ones by extending the duration of compulsory education. It was primarily driven by the need of post-war economies in Europe for a skilled workplace power to rebuild the countries destroyed by the Second World War. Economic growth was associated with human capital, which was seen as a profitable investment bringing benefits to society and each of its members. Therefore, during the 1950s and 1970s, the European countries extended the duration of schooling for 2–4 years, which in fact meant universalization of access to secondary education.

Globalization of the late 20<sup>th</sup> – early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries forms a new, market-oriented dimension of the educational systems development in Europe. Education begins to be viewed from the standpoint of building a knowledge society and a knowledge-based economy, which again actualizes the issue of the education duration. In the analytical report *Efficiency and Equity in European Education and Training Systems* authored by L. Wößmann and G. Schütz, the duration of education and its impact on society and on each individual member of this society is considered in two aspects – from the angle of the so-called monetary (market) and of social effects. It is proved that in both cases, longer education has a positive impact – on average across the European countries, each additional year of education is associated with more than 8% increase in wages.

As far as the positive monetary effect on the economy of a country is concerned, it is estimated that each additional year of average educational attainment raises macroeconomic productivity by a direct 6.2% in the average EU country and by a further 3.1% in the long run through its contribution to faster technological progress. There is also increasing evidence of non-market external returns to education. The most important fields of society that are influenced by education are the process of democratisation, the development of civic institutions and human rights, and political stability (Wößmann, Schütz 2006, pp. 4–8).

The position of Brussels on the strategic importance of education duration generates a tendency for further extension of schooling in the EU Member States. According to the European Commission/EURYDICE report *Key Data on Education in Europe*, compulsory full-time education in the EU countries lasts at least 8 years, while in most countries it is 9–10 years, in some of them – 11 or more years (*Key Data on Education in Europe* 2012, p. 29). As for the duration of full secondary education, in most European countries it was 12/13/14 years in 2014/15.

In Ukraine, the new Law “On Education” launched the second wave of the 12-year school introduction aimed at integration of the Ukrainian secondary education into the European educational space. Article 12 – Complete General Secondary Education – defines three levels, i.e.: primary education with duration of four years; basic secondary education with five years duration; and profession-oriented secondary education lasting three years (Law “On Education” 2017).

The European vector is also being tracked in the context of the introduction of cycles into the new structure of the Ukrainian school – the use of cycles/stages for building a school structure is a common practice in many EU countries. For the first time, the Law “On Education” (2017) in Article 12 specifies that at the levels of primary and basic secondary education, the educational process can be organized in cycles, the division of which is carried out taking into account physical, mental and intellectual development of children (Law “On Education” 2017).

The State Standard of Primary Education (2018) based on the Law “On Education” (2017) determines primary education cycles – 1–2 and 3–4 grades to take into account the age peculiarities and the needs of children in order to provide an opportunity to overcome differences in achievements due to readiness for education (State Standard for Primary Education 2018).

## REFORMS OF THE CONTENT OF SCHOOL EDUCATION

In the context of globalization and technological transformations, traditional education built on the transmission of knowledge to pupils, can no longer meet the needs of an economy and society. Today, the volume of information in the world doubles almost every two years, humanity constantly develops new (and at the same time rapidly aging) knowledge. Under such conditions, the only way out

for education is to support mastering vital skills by young people to enable them to respond to the changing needs of the labour market, adapt to new living conditions in communities. Thus, the idea of skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century has embraced the whole world.

In Europe, the competence approach turned into a philosophy that forms an innovative vision of education, the fundamental principles of its development. Approval in 2006 by the European Parliament and Council of the Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning has become a landmark between the period of the reflections of a large cohort of scholars under the aegis of international organizations on a competence concept and a period of its purposeful implementation within the EU (Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning 2006). The European Reference Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2006) identified eight key competencies required by citizens to succeed in the European Community, namely:

- communication in the mother tongue;
- communication in foreign languages;
- mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology;
- digital competence;
- learning to learn;
- social and civic competences;
- sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; and
- cultural awareness and expression (Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning 2006).

As it is indicated in the Commission Staff Working Document, Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2018), the importance of the European Reference Framework for promoting the competence education idea in the EU primarily centres on the following aspects:

- The Reference Framework:
  - led to the transformation of the conceptual foundations of the European education – the competence-based education focuses on the results of the educational process;
  - officially defined the essence of a key competence, which is characterised as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes. It enables an individual to interact with the outside world achieving needed results;
  - underlined the same importance and interconnection of all eight key competencies;
  - became a reference tool for all Member States for common understanding of the idea of the competence education as well for defining national education policies;
  - is viewed as a contributory factor in the shift towards competence orientation of the European education systems (Proposal for a Council

Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning 2018, pp. 6–7).

The European competence movement has a great influence on the Ukrainian education too. In fact, it has caused the replacement of the knowledge paradigm (dominated in the Soviet education) into the pupil- and result-oriented one. In particular, the transformations have comprised:

- the aim of secondary education – from the aim of forming a fully developed personality to forming an active personality with competences and
- its results – from “graduates equipped with knowledge, skills and values” to “graduates equipped with competencies providing opportunities to interact in the society and to build careers”.

It is clear that this movement is not easy. At the very beginning (at the early 2000s) it was accompanied by heated discussions on the definition of competences, etc. Meta/transversal competencies (learning to learn, social, entrepreneurship, etc.) became a challenge of a conceptual nature due to their entire novelty for the Ukrainian education theory.

Problems related to the introduction of a competence approach to the school practice should include the mismatch between the requirements of the levels of education (preschool, primary and secondary) defined in the regulatory documents.

Another challenge is the mismatch at the level of a method support. In a competent approach, attention is focused on the effective component of the academic achievements of each student, but the teaching aids (textbooks, manuals, etc.) (in its vast majority) are oriented towards the typical age of class pupils, where children with different educational abilities and different life experience simultaneously learn.

A generalized view on the problems of the competence secondary education implementation is presented in a National Report on the State and Prospects of Education Development in Ukraine. It indicates slow implementation of the competence education due to slow transformation of the curricula and textbooks into competence concept, development of the instruments to assess key/subject competences, etc. (National Report on the State and Prospects of Education Development in Ukraine 2016, p. 52).

The new Law of Ukraine “On Education” (2017) captured the competence approach to the school education at the legislative level. The Law defines the following key competences to be mastered by school graduates:

- fluency in the state language;
- ability to communicate in mother tongue (in case it differs from the state language) and foreign languages;
- mathematical competence;
- competence in the area of natural sciences,
- engineering and technology;
- innovation; ecological competence;

- information and communication competence;
- life-long learning;
- civil and social competences related to the ideas of democracy, justice, equality, human rights, well-being and a healthy lifestyle, with the awareness of equal rights and opportunities;
- cultural competence; entrepreneurship and financial literacy (Law of Ukraine “On Education” 2017).

As is evident from the foregoing, the proclaimed by the Law key competences are almost synchronized with the key competences defined by the European Reference Framework for Lifelong Learning (2006). The general vision of the phenomenon of competencies is also synchronised – a competence has been defined as a dynamic combination of knowledge, skills, ways of thinking, views, values, other personal qualities, which determines the ability of a person to successfully socialize, carry out professional and/or further educational activities (Law of Ukraine “On Education” 2017).

The common feature of the competence reform in the EU and in Ukraine is the introduction of a coherent strategy implemented at the highest educational policy level, i.e. at the supranational level in the EU and at the national level in Ukraine (Lokshyna 2018). In the EU it is Education and Training 2020 (2009), in Ukraine – New Ukrainian School (2016).

The review of the European Reference Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2006) resulted in the adoption of the renewed European Reference Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2018) with the updated list of key competences:

- literacy competence;
- languages competence;
- mathematical competence and competence in science;
- technology and engineering and; digital competence;
- personal, social and learning competence;
- civic competence;
- entrepreneurship competence;
- cultural awareness and expression competence (European Reference Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning 2018).

The modernised EU view of a competence education further actualizes the efforts of Ukraine in this area.

## CONCLUSIONS

The reforms of the structure and of the content of school education in the EU Member States are the response to the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, i.e. globalization in all its manifestations and the digital revolution. Ukraine, being a European



state under the influence of the common with the European countries challenges, should react the same way.

The analysis of the reforms taking place in the secondary education sector in Ukraine testifies to the fact that the Ukrainian school synchronizing with the European standards is taking place. This is confirmed by the adoption of the European-oriented legislation – the Law of Ukraine “On Education” (2017) that proclaims the 12-year competence-based schooling.

The adopted regulatory framework – the State Standard of Primary Education (2018) and typical educational programmes for 1–2 grades of the New Ukrainian School<sup>1</sup> further develop the European vector of the Ukrainian secondary education. The documents are synchronised with the Law in the aspect of competences, years of schooling and cycles.

It is obvious that such synchronization is not simple. Problems centre on both the external (to the education system) and internal aspects. Unfortunately, education reforms in Ukraine used to be affected by political forces leading to violations of the integrity of the European vector movement. Besides, the reforms were also complicated with the lack of a holistic consensus in the Ukrainian society.

Within the educational system, the problem is to consider the lagging momentum of the reforms in Ukraine with reforms in the EU. Equally important is the duly monitoring of the reform that is a systemic problem in Ukraine. The challenges also are manifested in the underdeveloped tools for competence-based 12-year education implementation in the aspects of curricula, textbooks, teaching methods, assessment, etc.

The main task today is to consolidate the progress made towards the EU standards, achieve the sustainability of the obtained results. Not less important is to continue the European-oriented movement. For this purpose, the Ukrainian education authorities should think about introducing the European working methods including common with the EU member countries strategic objectives, principles and benchmarks. The further development of the education and research space that is common with the EU and unite educators, scholars and students is no less a priority.

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<sup>1</sup> New Ukrainian School is the reform of general secondary education for the period 2018–2029.

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