

# Improving priority-setting processes in Bulgaria: Insights from the “Modernisation of Higher Education Institutions” procedure (2020-23)

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## Overview

This document summarises key findings and recommendations from the OECD’s evaluation of Bulgaria’s “Modernisation of Higher Education Institutions” procedure. The procedure funded 17 projects aiming to enhance alignment between the skills of higher education graduates and the needs of the labour market, under the Operational Programme “Science and Education for Smart Growth” 2014-2020.

The evaluation was carried out on the basis of the following criteria: relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability of results and EU added value of the competitive grant procedure through which funds were awarded to higher education institutions based on their project proposals. Findings are drawn on the basis of a realist approach, using a variety of research methods such as extensive document review, focus groups, interviews with policymakers and institutional leaders, and site visits to higher education institutions.

This summary of the evaluation’s findings is intended for the Executive Agency Programme Education, policy-implementing directorates within Bulgaria’s Ministry of Education and Science, European Commission, the members of the Monitoring Committee of Programme Education 2021-2027, the beneficiaries of the programme and other stakeholders in the field of education. It provides practical recommendations to help improve current and future competitive grant procedures and other higher education initiatives.

The projects planned under the *Modernisation* procedure were highly relevant to Bulgaria’s national and institutional priorities. They addressed key needs in the higher education system and contributed to much needed changes in higher education institutions, albeit to varying degrees. The implemented projects had some positive achievements, such as expanding professional development opportunities for faculty, making greater use of digital technologies in teaching, stimulating the development of skills and competency-based education, and encouraging collaboration between HEIs in curriculum development and teaching.

However, the very broad set of priorities paired with relatively modest funding meant that the potential of the *Modernisation* procedure to have systemic impact was limited. The evaluation identifies several constraints that future reform efforts address. First, the wide

range of priorities within an activity has led to complications, from assessing applications to reporting on results. This has increased the administrative burden and led to a waste of resources. A smaller and clearer set of objectives would allow a more focused use of the grant. Secondly, certain legal and financial provisions have made it difficult to implement activities effectively. They limit flexibility and make it difficult to adapt to specific needs during implementation. Finally, although formal public consultations were carried out in the planning and design of the activity, opportunities to involve experts with more in-depth specialisation in higher education outside these consultations remained limited. The evaluation found that such expert involvement was not consistently ensured throughout the life cycle of the activities, which limited the quality of decisions taken and led to challenges in the implementation of the activities. The lack of a sustainable knowledge and data sharing mechanism limited opportunities for real-time learning and improvement.

Building on these key findings, the evaluation offers four recommendations with related actions that Bulgaria can take to strengthen priority-setting processes in future competitive grant procedures.

## **1. Ensure a dynamic priority-setting process through focused and sustained stakeholder or expert engagement**

While the competitive grant procedure followed European and national guidelines and broad partnership principles, more systematic and effective dialogue with representatives from higher education institutions and policymakers was lacking. While higher education institutions, employers, and those working in related policy areas had the opportunity to provide feedback on draft selection criteria, there was limited scope for them to contribute more concretely to priority setting. Moreover, although consultation mechanisms were inclusive, resulting discussions were perceived as lacking the depth and targeted insight required for effective policymaking. In the future, measures to ensure that subject matter expertise and insights from the field strengthen reform efforts from start to finish would be valuable.

### **What does this mean in practice?**

- Engage higher education institutions, employers, and policymakers in a structured manner with the clear and stated objective of identifying priorities that align with national and institutional needs. This includes:
  - Clarifying the role of stakeholders in consultation exercises as well as the expectations for their participation, including preparation and follow-up.
  - Providing stakeholders with clear reflection questions before consultation to ensure more meaningful discussions and encourage related conversations within organisations and institutions.
- Convene a small Higher Education Technical Advisory Panel to serve as an ongoing thought partner and critical friend for priority-setting and beyond. This could be made up of 5-6 international and national higher education experts, with

experience and expertise in programme evaluation, education research, academic management, and public policy or legal work.

## **2. Conduct a comprehensive analysis of the enabling environment to inform priority setting**

Effective priority setting requires aligning ambitions with contextual realities. The interventions faced delays because key reforms, such as joint degree programmes, lacked legal clarity at the outset. While strong institutional collaboration and responsive support from the Managing Authority helped mitigate some of these challenges, misalignment between policy objectives and regulatory frameworks created barriers that slowed implementation across all participating higher education institutions. In addition, there was limited integration of lessons learned from past reforms. Greater attention to policy experiences that have been successful – or not – in Bulgaria and relevant international settings, could help tailor future priorities to the Bulgarian context.

### **What does this mean in practice?**

- Assess institutional readiness before finalising priorities. This includes careful consideration of the potential barriers (regulatory, financial, structural or capacity-related) to making progress in priority areas and the mechanisms required to overcome these barriers as well as recognition of those that cannot be sufficiently overcome given time and resource constraints.
- Draw on good evidence of what has worked in the past and why, and what has worked in other contexts and why, identifying lessons targeted to conditions in Bulgaria.

## **3. Integrate priority areas into project selection to ensure greater relevance and coherence**

The evaluation found that the application process and assessment methodology used in the competitive grant procedure were fair, transparent and impartial, largely due to a strong emphasis on quantitative criteria. While important, this limited the opportunity to more closely assess the details of the intervention logic underpinning proposed projects and therefore better understand their relevance and coherence. There are therefore important trade-offs to consider when designing criteria for the assessment of project proposals. Nevertheless, it is clear that the integration of qualitative criteria could help ensure a more rigorous selection of projects that are well-matched to strategic priorities and the pursuit of quality outcomes.

### **What does this mean in practice?**

- Design selection criteria that reflect strategic priorities, ensuring funding goes to initiatives with the greatest potential impact. This may entail:
  - Incorporating more qualitative indicators in the selection process to facilitate a broader assessment of the overall logic and quality of project

proposals and provide deeper insights into the relevance and coherence of proposed projects.

- Requiring proposals to demonstrate alignment with national priorities through a clear theory of change.

#### **4. Embed learning in the priority-setting process and beyond to support efficiency and sustainability**

While monitoring and reporting processes met regulatory requirements and ensured compliance, they lacked a focus on learning and improvement. As such, related efforts did not provide the necessary feedback to refine and enhance project outcomes or improve efficiency. Meanwhile, the absence of organised learning opportunities among beneficiaries may inhibit the sustainability of the changes introduced by higher education institutions. Many institutional representatives noted that reporting left little room for feedback on the quality of activities while they and other interviewees emphasised a desire for more mechanisms focused on collecting and disseminating good practices and shared challenges.

##### **What does this mean in practice?**

- Make learning a central element of the priority-setting process, ensuring continuous refinement during project application, selection and implementation. This includes:
  - Designing selection and funding criteria to incentivise higher education institutions to contribute to system-wide learning on key aspects within identified priority areas.
  - Gathering feedback from higher education institutions during proposal development and project implementation, not just at the end of the funding period.
  - Adapting priorities over time based on real-world challenges and successes, informed by knowledge-sharing activities among higher education institutions.

## Information about the project

Technical Report

### Modernisation of Higher Education Institutions Procedure in Bulgaria

Interim Evaluation and Lessons for education programming



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This summary is based on findings published in OECD (2025), *Modernisation of Higher Education Institutions Procedure in Bulgaria: Interim Evaluation and Lessons for Educational Programming*. The full report is available via the QR code below, at <https://doi.org/10.1787/cddcd19e-en> or <https://sf.mon.bg/?h=downloadFile&fileId=3857>

The report is an output of the OECD's agreement to support the Evaluation Plan of Bulgaria's Programme "Education" 2021-2027. Under this agreement, the OECD will conduct a series of interim and final evaluations of initiatives in five key thematic areas: 1) inclusive education, 2) integration of marginalised communities, 3) digitalisation and competency-based education, 4) vocational education and training, and 5) higher education.

For more information about either the report or the

