

OPINION

by

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Member of the scientific jury of the competition for the academic position *Associate Professor*

Professional strand: 1.2. Pedagogy

Candidate: Ch. Asst. Prof. Hristo Chukurliiev, PhD – New Bulgarian University, Sofia

I. Assessment of requirements

The candidate exceeds the minimum national requirements under Art. 2b of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the requirements of the New Bulgarian University for holding the position of *Associate Professor*.

II. Research activity and results

1. Hristo Chukurliiev participated in the competition with two monographs: *Evolution of University Education* is a large-scale habilitation thesis that examines the aims, methods and forms of university education in diachronic, synchronic and prospective terms. As far as I know, this is the first comprehensive pedagogical treatment in our country which clarifies the original idea of university education, the specifics of the various university centers, the teaching methods, the conceptual and structural dynamics of the curricula, and the changes in goal setting from Antiquity to the present, along with a view to future possibilities. Some of the developed aspects have been touched upon in previous scientific discourses, but only fragmentarily and in the context of other issues. Hristo Chukurliiev examines university education in a cultural perspective, which is generally characteristic of his research style. In addition to knowledge about university evolution, excursions in space and time also produce important halo effects concerning the impact of the university on economy, science, social development, philosophical ideas, information dynamics.

The central thematic paradigm of the thesis is higher education in the context of the Internet and digital technologies. Without isolating itself in the conceptual labyrinth of the classification terms "method", "form", "technique", "procedure", "strategy", but also unfolding in it an excellent theoretical orientation based on classic pedagogical works, the research study pursues its essential tasks - to present how generally accepted forms of education (regular, part-

time, evening) and teaching methods change over time and especially in an electronic environment. At this point, I will highlight two aspects: the contributing connection of theoretical thought with personal practical experience, and the mobile research consciousness with its sensitivity to the metamorphoses of external conditions. Actually, the word "evolution" from the thesis title is a denotation for a reason, one of its convincing predicates being precisely the problematization of modern university education. Hristo Chukurliev interprets its possibilities in accordance with the gamification trend, the flipped classroom, the use of personal electronic devices in the auditorium, the open online courses and even the employment of Wikipedia, YouTube and ChatGPT. Of special interest is the feedback of online teaching with Moodle, provided by students and teachers from New Bulgarian University.

The relations between the university and the profession are examined in terms of Hristo Chukurliev's characteristic doubt regarding the attainability of final scientific truths: this is further proved by the formulation of the problem of *professional education vs education for a profession*. The standpoint of rejecting university conservatism in relation to professions and of synchronizing higher education with the labor market is convincingly presented. On the basis of its own survey research, the thesis justifies the need to modernize professional education. The data presented are both important for the specific argumentation and for possible future research requiring authentic empirical material.

The monograph also problematizes the association of higher education with the professions of the future, as well as with the growing need to master "soft" skills - critical thinking, creativity, digital literacy, making constructive decisions, all of which is tied to teaching methods. The concepts of horizontal, vertical and faceted knowledge are carefully elucidated. The idea of future coordination between specialization and accommodation, as well as the studied opinions of teachers and students about educational models that are increasingly perceived as outdated, serve as another formulation of the desire to synchronize university education with the actual, and to some extent with the future socio-cultural context – insofar as it is predictable.

The second monograph with which Hristo Chukurliev participates in the competition, *Postpedagogy - Illusion or Reality*, can be considered as a kind of continuation of the first. The study presents theoretically and practically four methods of training, including a series of case studies related to them. Conceptual and practically applicable - this is how I can most briefly characterize this treatment which takes into account the information and technological boom in

today's educational situation. The scope of the problem is examined both in depth and in correspondence with its dynamic mutability. The proposed methods are effectively proven ("Description of a Discipline", "Humanitarian Laboratory"), modern game content has also been developed for teaching in a museum environment ("Venus from Slatina"), implementing a project or solving a case study ("The Time Machine"). The emphasis here is on discussion sessions, the flipped classroom, problem solving, different interactions, critical, combinatorial and creative thinking - introducing the idea of active externalism focused on producing extended knowledge while taking into account the cognitive characteristics of young people. A prerequisite for a higher result of interactions at the university is the proposed hypothesis about the components of the so-called *postpedagogy*, based on decentralized management of education, personalized teaching, integration of digital literacy into the teaching process and critical thinking.

The thesis purposefully and repeatedly examines language as a pedagogical problem, introducing an important thematic concept which rationalizes verbal interaction in the auditorium as a construct of educational reality. The value of this subject matter is further raised by its rather rare appearance in studies from this professional strand.

2. There are 16 articles presented in the announced competition, 2 of which are published, referenced and indexed in world-famous databases with scientific information. Part of the publications are dedicated to digital technologies in university education - a topic that permanently engages the candidate's attention and every time finds new relevant formulations. Hristo Chukurliev's articles further develop other important issues, among which I would highlight two - the creation of transferable skills through volunteering, and the conceptualization of critical thinking as a cognitive paradigm confronted with new challenges in a digital technology environment.

In total, Hristo Chukurliev's publications develop significant pedagogical problems with indisputable relevance, which is evident both from the questions discussed so far and from a number of others, such as: Is the relationship between the university and the business sphere productive, and if it is productive - for whom?; How to deal with the controversial character of connectivism?; How to personalize scientific information if we have 50 or 100 students?; What are the priority goals of the university – to provide professional training and practice or to develop complex abstract thinking, combinatorics and empathy skills?; How to balance between overspecialization and interdisciplinarity?; How to communicate with the new generations?, etc.

The questions raised are sometimes addressed to the author himself – entirely to his credit, because doubt is both the engine of scientific thinking and an expression of intellectual honesty.

To summarize, I recognize the contributions of Hristo Chukurliev's research activity in two main areas. The first concerns the ability to formulate and theoretically develop essential scientific questions. The focused problem clusters are multifold, while the threads issuing from them weave an intertextual network which covers the most important aspects of modern university education: analyzing and evaluating productive methods, approaches and techniques of teaching; adaptation of the educational process to the needs of modern society; integration of digital technologies. Theoretical modelling, starting from a specific educational challenge and proceeding through its apprehension and understanding, results in posing a hypothesis for its solution. The second area of contribution concerns the approbation of theoretical ideas, which reveals their practical effectiveness for a fuller engagement of students in the educational process, encouraging them to participate in discussions and think critically, as well as stimulating feedback between them and the teachers for the purpose of enabling interaction.

All this considered, the theses of Hristo Chukurliev represent a significant remark in modern pedagogical discourse. They are part of a pedagogy oriented towards *understanding* which can be called *pedagogy of understanding* (if I may allow myself to use a sociological term by analogy) - a pedagogy which, acknowledging and establishing the norm, goes beyond it to advance towards the field of open knowledge that probes the depths of meaning.

3. Secondary source citation

Hristo Chukurliev indicates 10 citations in peer-reviewed monographs and collective volumes, and 5 citations in non-referenced peer-reviewed journals.

4. Evaluation of the results of participation in research projects

The candidate is leader of 3 national projects, participating in 1 international and 3 national projects. Between their various and complex problem areas I detect a common intersection which I would define with the terms *innovation* and *high practical value*.

III. Teaching activity

Hristo Chukurliev conducts various theoretical and practical courses, ten of which are developed in Moodle with author's materials. He attracts students in two research projects and supervises several graduate students. He received high marks from students for his teaching activities. He has made an indisputable contribution to the additional qualification of the teaching

and administrative staff of the New Bulgarian University, being the creator of a special program in this area and holding numerous achievements as a tutor.

IV. Administrative and public activity

The candidate has extensive administrative experience and various public contributions: he is part of the management of the National Center for Distance Education and the UniArt Gallery at New Bulgarian University, a member of the accreditation committee of the School of Basic Education, the School of Distance, Online and Continuing Education and the Accreditation Council, and is also director of the university administration.

V. Personal impressions of the candidate

My impressions are of a person with excellent teamwork skills, manifesting a clear and well-motivated position, diplomacy and collegial correctness. I got a close idea of Hristo Chukurliiev's professionalism from my participation in the "Teacher's Cafe" online courses organized by him, and especially from his explanation of the intricacies of working with Moodle.

IV. Conclusion

I firmly cast my positive vote for awarding the academic position of Associate Professor in professional strand 1.2. Pedagogy to Hristo Chukurliiev.

Sofia, December 2, 2024

Assoc. Prof. Ogniana Georgieva-Teneva