

## Opinion

from Prof. Dr Siyka Chavdarova – Kostova

member of scientific jury in a concurs for holding the academic position of „associate professor“ in a professional field 1.2. Pedagogy / ICT in education, e-learning of students with special educational needs /, announced by Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski“ in the State Gazette, No57/26.06.2020

The only one candidate in the competition is Asst. Prof. Blagovesna Yovkova, PhD, lecturer in the Faculty of Pedagogy at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski ". The subjects she has been teaching as a full-time chief assistant at the Faculty of Pedagogy since 2013, as a titular and assistant, are entirely in the profile of the competition: ICT in education, Training of children with learning difficulties, Distance education for adults, Assessment and selection of educational software, Theory and methodology of e-learning, Pedagogical design of e-learning, Creating educational multimedia, Educational opportunities of social media, ICT in learning and working in a digital environment, ICT and management in education, Technologies in teaching children with special educational needs, Inclusive education.

The university education of Asst. Prof. Bl. Yovkova, PhD (Master of Bulgarian Philology and Master of Special Pedagogy) is a natural prerequisite for her commitment to the issue of special pedagogy as a practical professional activity and subsequent research activity. Her many years of practice in a school for children with hearing impairments stimulated her research work as a doctoral student, which resulted in the successful defense of a dissertation on "Interactive educational multimedia in oral speech training for children with hearing impairment" /2011/, reflected in a monograph with the same title.

Asst. Prof. Bl. Yovkova, PhD, has extensive experience in project work as a researcher in the field of ICT in education, at university, national and international

level. For the last two years he has also been the leader of projects aimed at educating students with special educational needs in a university environment.

The monograph "E-learning - opportunities to expand access to higher education for students with special educational needs", with which Asst. Prof. Bl. Yovkova, PhD is applying as a habilitation thesis, has undoubtedly contributions in the two main directions of the competition. While there is a variety of publications for children with special educational needs in Bulgarian language, no such finding can be made for students with such needs. It is no coincidence that in the first chapter the training of students with special educational needs is commented as a challenge to the university education.

The specifics of concrete groups of students that are presented can be of benefit to both lecturers and administrative staff in the university environment, as they are also part of its communication system and should have basic information in this regard. The issue of accessibility is not limited only to the opportunities provided by the physical environment. At the beginning of the first chapter the main pedagogical orientation of this theoretical-empirical research is outlined, in which is its undoubtedly value, provoked by the increase of "the requirements to the methods of teaching, the ways of learning and testing, to the quality of the didactic resources used during lectures, exercises and for the self-preparation of students, to the psychological and pedagogical components of the environment, excluding discriminatory attitudes and practices focused on deficits".

In fact, the whole monograph is a kind of answer to the question: "Are Bulgarian universities accessible to students with different types of disorders?" /p. 15/. Asst. Prof. Bl. Yovkova, PhD draws attention to the need for transformation of the educational approach by placing "emphasis on the inclusive education of this group of students by personalizing the training depending on the individual needs and preferences of the learner" /p.20/

It can be said that the monograph is a kind of rich in content handbook (including the practices applied at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski") for each teacher how to work effectively with students with special educational needs with

different types of disorders (and in the context of assessment), recalling reasonably that "it is very important higher education institutions, including academic staff that provide training, to realize the need to create not just a learning environment but a supportive environment that will stimulate and motivate students with SEN "/p.26/.

Asst. Prof. Bl. Yovkova, PhD convincingly proves the possibilities of e-learning in the context of expanding access to education for students with special educational needs, not neglecting the consideration of "barriers in the process of their inclusion and learning related to the accessibility and usability" of ICT technologies in education. The conclusion she reaches deserves special attention: "The lack of good design and use of incorrect strategies for online learning leads to negative consequences - low performance and affects negatively the motivational sphere of students with SEN." /p.32/ The presented results of the empirical research with students and lecturers from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" unequivocally lead to the conclusion that "the digital competence and experience of lecturers to work with students with SEN is an important, but not the only condition for the design and implementation of accessible and quality e-learning. The outlined deficits and knowledge, skills and competencies of the teaching staff for the use of electronic resources for the purposes of teaching this group of students is obviously a factor determining the need for targeted and systematic training of university lecturers in the use of ICT in the specific context of teaching of students with different types of disorders, respectively selection, development and use of adequate electronic learning materials in accordance with technological standards for accessibility and usability"/p.160/.

The articles with which Asst. Prof. Bl. Yovkova, PhD applies can be summarized in the following groups:

✓ Co-authored articles:

- Articles related to e-learning for students with special educational needs: "The disabled and non-disabled students' views and attitudes towards e-authentication in e-assessment"; „Factors affecting the attitude of university professors towards the use of electronic resources in the education of disabled

students“; "Opportunities for optimizing the education of students with special educational needs through the use of electronic learning resources"; „Perceptions of students with special educational needs and disabilities towards the use of e-assessment in online and blended education: barrier or aid?” etc.;

- Articles related to the e-learning in the higher education system: „Factors affecting students' attitudes towards online learning - The case of Sofia University“; „The impact of technology on cheating and plagiarism in the assessment – The teachers' and students' perspective“; „Addressing cheating in e-assessment using student authentication and authorship checking systems: teachers' perspectives“; „How Students' Experience in E-Learning Affects Their Judgements about the Quality of an Online Course“ etc.;

- Articles related to the assessment of students in an electronic environment: „The potential of the TeSLA authentication system to support access to e-assessment for students with special educational needs and disabilities (Sofia university experience)“; „The impact of prior experience of e-learning and e-assessment on students' and teachers' approaches to the use of a student authentication and authorship checking system“;

- Articles related to the preparation of teachers for work in an electronic environment: "Formation of professional competencies within a virtual pedagogical practicum of students - future teachers"; „SimAULA. Training our teachers through innovative methodologies based on serious games“ и др.;

✓ Articles without co-authors:

- Articles related to the e-learning of students with special educational needs: "Some applications of ICT to overcome the problems in the education of students with special educational needs"; "E-distance learning - modern perspectives for students with special educational needs"; “Distance learning of students with special educational needs - roles and functions of the lecturer”;

- Article related to the preparation of teachers for work in an electronic environment: "Pedagogical model for electronic distance learning of teachers."

It is impressive the predominant number of articles referenced and indexed in the Web of Science and Scopus, a fact that is eloquent enough about the quality of published texts and the opportunities for publicity in the international research space. The reference for citations also reflects the significant number of citations in Web of Science and Scopus, as well as in other databases.

I fully accept the outlined contributions from Asst. Prof. Blagovesna Yovkova, PhD in the three main areas:

- Integration of information and communication technologies in education
- E-learning of students with special educational needs
- Electronic distance learning and electronic assessment.

I would recommend Asst. Prof., PhD Blagovesna Yovkova to publish more articles without co-authors so that her personal scientific contributions to be more highlighted.

The documents submitted in connection with the competition show compliance with the minimum national requirements for holding the academic position of "associate professor".

Conclusion:

The scientific production presented for the purposes of the competition by Asst. Prof. Blagovesna Yovkova, PhD, the dominant number of publications referenced and indexed in Web of Science and Scopus, the active participation in international project activities, as well as in Bulgaria, the recognition of the author as a specialist in both areas of the competition, give me enough reasons to support convincingly and positively the award of the academic position of associate professor, PF 1.2. Pedagogy /ICT in education, e-learning of students with special educational needs / of Asst. Prof. Blagovesna Yovkova, PhD.

20.10.2020.

Sofia

Signature:

/Prof. Dr S. Chavdarova-Kostova/