

<https://doi.org/10.28925/12518-7635.2022.73>

TRENDS IN PRE-SERVICE PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' ADMISSION TO HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE BENELUX COUNTRIES

Tetiana Holovatenko

ORCID ID 0000-0002-7545-3253

PhD in Education,

Senior lecturer of the

Foreign Languages and Methodology Department,

Faculty of Education,

Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University,

18/2 Ihor Shamo Blvd., Kyiv, Ukraine

t.holovatenko@kubg.edu.ua

ABSTRACT

This article is a comparative research on the admission process to higher educational institutions in the Benelux countries. In this paper, the author aimed at identifying trends in the admission process to the Primary Education programs in the Benelux countries and ways to implement best practices into Ukrainian realities. The study is grounded in a qualitative methodology, with a wide range of empirical methods used. Collected data is structured on organizational, content and assessment levels of trends. On the organizational level, we have identified trends in the digitalization of the admission process to teaching programs; commercialization of the admission process; organization of a multistep enrolment procedure. On the content level, we have identified trends in the identification of compulsory subject tests for applicants; including the identification of motivation and personal aptitude towards teaching into the admission process. On the assessment level, we identified trends in taking the results of the admission test as a formative assessment. The article addresses various ways to implement best practices in Ukraine.

Keywords: admission; elementary school teacher; primary school teacher; test, the Benelux countries.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a significant shortage of primary school teachers in schools, which results in a growing ratio of students per

teacher in Ukraine (Samokhin, 2020). This problem is complex and rooted in the issues of allocating budget funds to schools, raising teachers' salaries, motivating graduates to work at schools and selecting motivated applicants to become primary school teachers. In this study, the author focuses attention on the process of selection of motivated applicants and their enrolment into higher educational institutions (HEIs).

The admission process to HEIs in Ukraine was established by the Law of Ukraine On Higher Education (2014). This Law gives importance not only to further integration of the Ukrainian educational system into European but also to saving national peculiarities of the educational system in Ukraine (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2014). However, the admission procedures, primarily the test format, have been changed to meet the challenges of wartime. Namely, several individual paper-based tests were changed by one multi-subject complex test and a motivation letter as the main tools for the selection and admission to the Primary School teacher training programs.

However, both the Ministry of Education and Science and the developers admit this is not a perfect option, yet it is the best one in this situation (Markovskaya, 2022).

One of the major drawbacks of this temporary system of assessment is its lack of inclusiveness. Students with visual impairments were not given the possibility to take this test. Moreover, the scope of the test content has been significantly reduced due to the context applicants are in, yet it raises concerns if students are ready to take university courses with their current level of knowledge.

Among other problems, HEIs face a decrease in the number of students enrolled, and lower minimal grades of enrollees (Ohneviuk, 2021, 67-68). The problem of admission to teacher training programs is complex and requires a comprehensive approach to its solving. To identify feasible ways of selecting pre-service primary school teachers, it is necessary to study the diverse experience of European countries in organizing the admission process and suggest adaptation of individual practices to Ukrainian realities.

BACKGROUND

In the last few years, there has been a growing interest in comparative international analyses of trends in higher teacher education. For instance, trends in teacher training in the EU and Ukraine (Mospan, 2016; Mospan, 2017), and trends in the continuing education of teachers in the EU (Kaminska, 2019), trends in the organization of the pre-service primary school teacher training (Ivanova et al., 2021; Kotenko & Holovatenko, 2020). Moreover, the issue of pre-service primary teachers' training continuously attracts the attention of scholars (Hamed et al., 2020; Velthuis et al., 2014).

Researchers have two different opinions regarding the way applicants should be selected to the teaching program. Some indicate that one of the most

important things in selecting pre-service teachers is their motivation, engagement, emotional intelligence (Wurf & Croft-Piggin, 2015), and personal interest in teaching (Gore et al., 2016). Other scholars advocate for academic achievements as the defining criteria for admission (Auguste et al., 2010; Mankki et al., 2020).

Wurf and Croft-Piggin in their research on predicting the academic achievement of first year students using surveying proved that student's motivation and engagement in learning is a better predictor of their end-of-year result, than their initial level of knowledge (Wurf & Croft-Piggin, 2015, 75-91). This study empirically backs up the importance of admitting students based not only on their grades, but primarily on their motivation.

Another research by Gore, Barron, Holmes, and Smith supports the idea that motivation is a key predictor of further professional choice of graduates. Scholars have designed a longitudinal research to study the interest in teaching profession among students of Years 3-12. The results indicate interest in teaching is widespread among both high achievers and students with worse academic achievements from various social background (Gore, et al., pp. 527-549). Research results indicate the importance of creating the selection process which enables students with diverse background being enrolled. Additionally, the research has also evidenced high level of motivation to being a teacher among low-achievers. Hence, as rating is an important feature of the enrolment system, highly motivated low-achievers might become excluded from the process of admission, which makes access to teacher training programs a privilege.

There is contradictory opinion among the scholars as well. According to a different approach, only best-achievers working as teachers can ensure high quality of education and high achievements of their students. For instance, in Singapore, South Korea and Finland, where students outperform on PISA assessment, pre-service teachers are selected from the 'top-third +' achievers (Auguste et al., 2010, p. 9). Mankki et al., (2020) describe a two-stage selection process in Finland: a national multiple choice test and a face-to-face aptitude test. As scholars state, in Finland the system of teacher selection is largely competitive and only get a place at the program after thorough selection process (p. 151-153). Teacher educators act as gatekeepers by assessing the progress of pre-service teachers. However, teacher educator's prediction about applicant's performance in the program during their entrance examinations was poor. Better scores achieved during the enrolment process did not mean students were as successful in their studies. There are also issues of injustice during the second stage of the admission process, such as awarding higher points to male and older participants due to educator's will to help them to be enrolled (Mankki et al., 2020).

Previously, the author studied the experience of the Benelux countries in organizing the admission to Primary Education programs in the context of teacher training (Holovatenko, 2021). However, the primary focus

of the research was on teacher preparation, not on the admission process in the Benelux countries.

Based on the literature analysis, we can conclude the problem of selection and admission of pre-service primary school teachers to HEIs was scarcely researched and needs further structured research.

Among the European countries our attention is drawn to the Benelux countries, as these countries present a diversified experience in organizing the admission process: in Belgium there are three educational systems (Flanders, Wallonia, and German-speaking Belgium) each having a unique admission system, in the Netherlands the admission process is centralized to some extent and in Luxembourg there is only one university preparing pre-service primary school teacher and the admission procedure is largely designed by the University itself.

In this research, the author is guided by the following research questions:

- What trends of selection and admission of pre-service primary school teachers are implemented in the Benelux countries?
- What best practices based on findings can be implemented in Ukraine?

METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative study in Comparative Education. The empirical methods used in the study are comparison by one feature; case study, and analysis of authentic documents and websites; description of the system of pre-service primary school teacher admission to higher educational institutions in the Benelux countries.

The empirically collected data is structured at 3 levels of trends: organizational, content and assessment. Based on the comparative research, the author suggests ways of implementation of best practices in Ukraine.

RESULTS

On the organizational level, the author identifies trends concerned with the ways the enrolment process is organized across the educational systems in the Benelux countries.

Digitalization of the admission process to teaching programs. The overall trend to digitalization of the admission process has different variations. For instance, in Flanders, applicants can take a compulsory online test wherever and whenever they want. The test is administered by the association of higher schools in the region, called VLHORA (Vlaamse Hogescholenraad). Applicants also register online to apply for the programme at the websites of individual HEIs in Flanders.

In the German-speaking Belgium, students work with a web-site, where they learn about teaching profession, assess themselves in typical situations teachers perform in, assess their personal traits. The application to the HEI is also submitted online (Aufnahmeverfahren, 2020).

In Wallonia, applicants apply through individual HEI web-sites. Based on the analysis of websites of Wallonian HEIs, 92.3% of HEIs enabled online registration for their applicants (Holovatenko, 2021, 133).

In the Netherlands the enrolment process is organized through the national system called Studielink, which is a means of a general management of the application process, which enables connection between the HEI and the applicant. Through this system, applicants can choose time and place of taking enrolment tests and get their results (Toelatingstoetsen, 2020).

In Luxembourg, applicants complete an online admission application form, pay the enrolment fee, create a temporary account and submit documents online. They also take a computer-based online enrolment test (Application for Admission, 2022).

To sum it up, in the Benelux countries ways of digitalization of the admission process vary from online registration of the applicant, submission of an application through a national online system to computer-based online tests.

The digitalization of the enrolment process has also started in Ukraine. For instance, applicants register for the national entrance tests and get their results online. However, one of the stages of the enrolment process is bringing paper enrolment documents to the chosen HEI and signing the paper in presence of the HEI representative. This practice might be reconsidered, taking into account European experience.

Also, in all these educational systems, there is a *trend to commercialization of the admission process*. All applicants pay the registration fee when applying to the HEI across some educational systems.

For instance, in Wallonia applicants pay €50 admission fee (Holovatenko, 2021, 259; Registrations, 2022). In Luxembourg, applicants pay a €50 admission fee (Uni.lu introduces a 50 EUR application fee, 2021). In the Netherlands, where admission takes place through the national system, the admission fee is paid only by non-nationals (€100) (Applying for a Bachelor's programme, 2022; Holovatenko, 2021, 262).

In the German-speaking Belgium and in Flanders the admission fee is not imposed (Admission procedure, 2022; Holovatenko, 2021, 255).

The payment is processed online and is one of the leverages for securing places for enrollees at the HEI. The fee also covers the processing of the applicant's submission. It is worth mentioning, that in the German-speaking Belgium and in Flanders applicants can choose only one HEI they want to enter, so there is no need in additionally securing the place in the program.

European experience of commercialization of the admission process might be one of the solutions to encourage a more responsible choice of training programs by enrollees.

Organization of a multi-step enrolment procedure. In educational systems of the Benelux countries HEIs introduced a multi-step enrolment procedure, aiming at identifying previous knowledge of applicants, their motivation, experience and aptitude towards a teaching profession.

For instance, in Flanders applicants undergo a three-step enrolment process including a subject test, study skills screening and motivation test (Instaptoets Lerarenopleiding Oefentest, 2020). These three steps are compulsory for all applicants. However, their result does not the student rating (Головатенко, 2021, p. 107).

The author finds this practice to be worth piloting in Ukraine and comparing results with the traditional enrolment process. However, the difference in the number of applicants might become one of the limitations of the study.

In the Autonomous Higher School in German-speaking Belgium the enrolment process comprises four steps: online screening for applicants' personal profile, previous experience and aptitudes; online submission of the documents to the HEI; subject test; interview with applicants, which includes self-presentation and discussion of a pedagogical situation (Aufnahmeverfahren, 2020; Career Counselling for Teachers, 2020).

Even though the case of multi-step enrolment process proves to be effective in the German-speaking Belgium, its implementation into the Ukrainian educational system might drastically reduce the number of pre-service teachers, but solve the problem of early career drop-outs as well.

In the Netherlands, the enrolment process includes obligatory national subject tests. This system is to a large extent similar to the Ukrainian one. However, the next steps are set by HEIs. For instance, in NHL Stenden applicants fill in the survey; submit CV and motivation letter; have an interview and do a Mathematics test in groups (International Teacher Education for Primary Schools (ITEPS), 2021). In Luxembourg the admission process includes a cover letter, online motivation survey, test and surveying applicants for their background (Admission Procedure to the University of Luxembourg).

To the author's opinion, the practice of collecting applicant's data on their motivation and previous experience is already pivoting its way in Ukraine. The idea of observing applicants' group work as a part of the selection process is also worth piloting, as it can demonstrate applicant's aptitude towards teaching.

In Wallonia, a different trend can be identified — the applicants do not undergo enrolment testing for a Primary Education programme. They are enrolled based on their applications (Головатенко, 2021, p. 259).

Enrolment only by the applications raises the concern if pre-service teachers are motivated enough to graduate and stay in profession. Hence, this option to the author's opinion should be brought to light in a wider societal context and in context of program expectations towards students. These factors largely influence the quality of education and the level of external motivation to working as a teacher.

The results of the analysis show that multi-stage enrolment process includes informing about the teaching profession, tests and interviews prior to the admission. We find this approach being well-suited to the aim of identifying

applicants for the Primary Education program, who are competitive in terms of knowledge, personality traits, motivation, self-presentation and their soft skills.

An important implication of these findings is that results of the multi-stage enrolment process might guarantee the selection of motivated applicants with the aptitude towards teaching, yet if the societal expectations towards the teaching profession are low, in-service career of teachers might experience early career drop-off.

On the content level, we have analysed the content of the admission tests in the Benelux countries and have identified the following trends.

Identification of compulsory subject tests for applicants. In Flanders the compulsory subjects are Dutch (national language), Mathematics, French (foreign language) (Instaptoets Lerarenopleiding Oefentest, 2020). In German-speaking Belgium, the admission test includes tasks aiming at testing their language and Mathematic skills, special thinking skills, and logical thinking on a pedagogical topic (Aufnahmeverfahren, 2020). In the Netherlands the required tests are Geography, History, Nature and Technology (Toelatingstoetsen, 2022). In Luxembourg the admission test includes Mathematics; Science; French and German grammar and vocabulary; reading in French, English, German and Luxembourgish (Admission Procedure to the University of Luxembourg).

The findings show that across all educational systems the common admission tests comprise the native language, Mathematics and foreign language. The difference in the implementation of this trend is in the Netherlands, where applicants must undergo a different set of admission tests. However, all applicants take a Mathematics and Dutch national obligatory test at the end of the first year of studies (Study Guide, 2021).

This trend is already implemented in Ukraine with Ukrainian, Mathematics and Ukrainian History being compulsory tests for admission (Enrolment in Primary Education programs full time, 2022).

Including the identification of motivation and personal aptitude towards teaching into the admission process. A great importance is given not only to applicants' knowledge, but to their motivation as well. For instance, in Flanders, a separate part of the admission test includes a test to identify the level of study skills and applicant's motivation.

In German-speaking Belgium, there is a separate webpage with Linkert scale aiming at self-assessment of applicants in the main areas of teacher's work (Figure 1). There is also a web-page with a scale for identifying how applicants demonstrate 12 opposite characteristics. The following web-page is aimed at identifying applicants' experience of working with a child/ a group of children (Career Counselling for Teachers, 2020). The result of the survey is used for applicant's reference. However, the last stage of the admission process is an interview aiming at oral self-presentation (story about themselves, their motivation to choose their job, previous experience with children) and an analysis of a short video with pedagogical situation (Aufnahmeverfahren, 2020).

Stellen Sie sich vor, Sie sind Lehrer/in:

Wie gern führen Sie vermutlich folgende Tätigkeiten aus?

		sehr ungerne	ungerne	weder gern noch ungerne	gern	sehr gern
1	den Schüler/innen einen Sachverhalt erklären	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
2	Konflikte zwischen den Schüler/innen zu klären versuchen	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
3	Fachliteratur zu meinen Gegenständen lesen	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
4	bei einem Elternabend über mögliche Bildungswege informieren	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5	überprüfen, was die Schüler/innen können	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6	neue Schüler/innen in die Klasse integrieren	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 1. A sample of the Linkert scale questionnaire for applicants of the German-speaking Belgium

In the Netherlands, after the registration, applicants are obliged to fill in the survey and submit their motivation letter. After that, they proceed to an in-person interview with successful applicants, aiming at identifying the level of speaking English and motivation of applicants. During this interview, there are also Mathematics tasks and group tasks to identify team-working skills of applicants.

In Luxembourg, the admission test includes a part, where applicants provide general information about them which serves to gather some basic information about a various cohort of enrollees.

On the assessment level, there is a *trend to taking in the results of the admission test as a formative assessment*. In most educational systems in the Benelux countries, the admission test does not influence the rating of the applicant. In Flanders, the results of the test give applicants an opportunity to identify their weaknesses and show the higher school the way to individualize the professional development of a student (Vlaamse Hogescholenraad, 2020). Based on these results, students can study the program in three or four years. Moreover, in some higher schools (e.g. Artesis Plantijn Hogeschool Antwerpen) the results of the enrolment test are regarded as a placement test and after it first-year students undergo a screening test to identify further ways to individualize their professional development. There are the following ways to individualize preservice teacher training, for example using online trainings in Spelling and Mathematics; extracurricular courses; 1:1 student consultations; group consultations; part-time trajectory of the program (60 ECTS of the first year are split into two years) (Vlaamse Hogescholenraad, 2020).

In Wallonia there is no admission test and further individualization of the study route takes place during the studies at the instructor's decision (Holovatenko, 2021, 259).

In the Netherlands, regardless of the interview result, applicants make their own decision on applying or not to the program. The interview with them is aimed to demonstrate them their strengths and weaknesses, but not to select them or create a rating.

In the German-speaking Belgium, only a part of the admission survey where applicants learn about a role of a teacher and evaluate their personal characteristics is considered as a formal assessment.

However, a different trend can be identified in Luxembourg, where results of the subject tests are important, and the test results are summative.

Based on the identified organizational trends, the author would recommend adapting and implementing the following practices into the Ukrainian process of admitting applicants to the Primary Education program:

- introducing full online application process to enable communication with the HEI through applicant's profile in the system;
- further digitalization of the application and the enrolment process in HEIs (full online paperless application process);
- charge the admission fee for processing offline applications to encourage a more responsible choice of future career and HEI;

After structuring the trends on the content level, the author would like to suggest:

- admitting to teaching programs based not only on the knowledge tests, but also on the identification of applicants' personal characteristics;
- enhancing the domain of identifying motivation by Linkert scale surveys;
- introducing foreign language as one of the compulsory subjects;
- including in-person interviews and the identification of personality traits, self-presentation and soft skills into the steps of the admission process;

Identification of trends on the assessment level enables the author suggesting:

- introducing a formative assessment part into the admission process (learning about teachers' responsibilities, self-assessment of personal characteristics) to balance the summative and formative approach towards assessment of enrollees.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In this study we have analysed the trends of the admission process in the Benelux countries on three levels: organizational, content and assessment. On the organizational level, we have identified a trend to digitalization of the admission process to teaching programs; commercialization of the admission process; organization of a multi-step enrolment procedure. On the content level, we have identified a trend to identification of compulsory subject tests for applicants; including the identification of motivation and personal aptitude towards teaching into the admission process. On the assessment level,

we identified a trend to taking in the results of the admission test as a formative assessment.

Based on the identified trends, the author suggests practices to be implemented into Ukrainian realities. Prospects for further research are in analysing ways of building individual student trajectories during their studies.

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ТЕНДЕНЦІЇ ОРГАНІЗАЦІЇ ВСТУПНОГО ПРОЦЕСУ НА СПЕЦІАЛЬНІСТЬ «ПОЧАТКОВА ОСВІТА» ДО ЗАКЛАДІВ ВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ У КРАЇНАХ БЕНІЛЮКСУ

Тетяна Головатенко, доктор філософії, старший викладач кафедри іноземних мов і методик їх навчання Факультету педагогічної освіти, Київський університет імені Бориса Грінченка, вул. Бульварно-Кудрявська, 18/2, 04053, Київ, Україна. t.holovatenko@kubg.edu.ua

Ця стаття є порівняльно-педагогічним дослідженням процесу вступу до вищих навчальних закладів у країнах Бенілюксу. Метою статті є виявити тенденції процесу вступу на програми «Початкова освіта» в країнах Бенілюксу та шляхи впровадження перспективного досвіду в Україні. Дослідження ґрунтується на якісній методології з використанням широкого спектру емпіричних методів. Зібрані дані структуровані в тенденції на організаційному, змістовому та оцінювальному рівнях. На організаційному рівні виявлено тенденцію до диджиталізації процесу вступу на освітню програму; комерціалізація процесу вступу; організація багатоступеневої процедури зарахування. На змістовному рівні виявлено тенденцію до виділення обов'язкових предметів у переліку документів для вступу; визначення мотивації та особистих здібностей до роботи вчителем у процесі вступу. На оцінювальному рівні виявлено тенденцію до формувального характеру результатів вступного випробування. У статті визначено шляхи впровадження кращих практик в Україні.

Ключові слова: вступ; тест; країни Бенілюксу; вчитель початкових класів; вчитель початкових класів.

Received: 15.11.2022

Accepted: 31.12.2022