

**WELLNESS EDUCATIONAL INNOVATIONS - AUDIT
REPORT*****Dimitrova, Bistra****Prof, D. Sc. Faculty of public health, health care and Tourism**National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski", Bulgaria**<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3152-9831>*

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INTRODUCTION

Wellness tourism refers to travel that prioritizes health and well-being, with the goal of enhancing physical, mental, and spiritual health (Ignatova, 2022; Nesheva 2022). It typically involves activities such as Spa treatments, fitness and recreational classes, meditation, and healthy eating (Tomova et al., 2023; Chipeva 2019; Nesheva 2019). Recreational programs, on the other hand, are leisure activities that promote physical and mental relaxation, such as hiking, camping, and sports (Chipeva 2018; Tomova et al., 2023; Ilinova et al., 2019; Ignatova et al. 2022). As we mentioned, in other publications, wellness tourism is a growing industry, and it presents an opportunity for Bulgaria to attract more visitors and generate revenue (Polimenov 2019; Tsanov 2015; Dimitrova, 2019; Nesheva 2023a). However, the lack of clear definitions and standards in the industry, as well as the shortage of specialised personnel, can hinder its growth and competitiveness (Polimenov 2014; Nesheva 2023; Markov et al., 2019).

To address these challenges, Bulgaria may need to invest in training programs for wellness and recreational professionals and create clear guidelines and standards for the industry (Nesheva 2022; Markov, 2019; Chipeva 2018a). Additionally, efforts to improve health literacy among Bulgarians can increase demand for wellness tourism domestically (Polimenov, 2022). In highly demanded is the specialized staff and new accredited programs for them to transform Bulgaria in a destination for international travelers seeking wellness experiences (Polimenov, 2023).

The development of polyvalent Wellness & Spa culture is very important (Polimenov, 2018; Ignatova 2022). The significance of physical activity in the aquatic environment must be acknowledged for its positive impact on customer health and quality of life (Nesheva 2023a; Ignatova et al 2020). Finding highly qualified personnel for wellness centers is a major problem, and the situation is not improving (Polimenov 2022). The industry is facing a "War for Talents," and many owners of wellness centers report difficulty finding the right mix of experience and skills in their employees. The demand for specialised packages is growing rapidly, requiring more staff than what is currently available. This has led to an increased focus on education, training, and certification programs for employees in the industry. The global wellness tourism market is valued at 425 billion euros, with 36% generated by Europe, and six of the top 10 destinations are located in Europe. The European Wellness industry

recognises the importance of training and education to maintain its leading position and ensure high-quality services. After the Global pandemic situation, promoting public health can be achieved through connected educational, social, and health policies, as well as standards and restrictions (Tomova, 2021). To acquire the societal happiness, it's crucial to enhance individual life capacities and respects the social natural environment (Dimitrova, 2023). There is a lack of personnel trained through specialised programs, who have acquired specific knowledge and skills for successful implementation and achieving high quality of services, with command of at least 2 foreign languages (Dimitrova 2023, Veselinov, 2021).

METHODS

The Bulgarian law for Accreditation in the field of Higher education in conformity with the European Education and Science legacy have a unified standarts for evaluation and accreditation for each educational level. The evaluation methodology content is as following;

1. Implementation of the recommendations of the previous Accreditation Period;
2. Verification of the fulfillment of the program criteria crediting in accordance with the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European area for higher education /ESG/ - part 1 /1-10/ and in the sense of art. 78, para. 3 of the Higher Education Act /Table 5/, adopted by the AC of NAEA on 20.10.2016;
3. Testimonials;
4. Appendices: tables /mandatory and optional/;
5. The official letter to the Chairman of the Committee on Health and Sports.

The Expert Group (EG) in implementation of a decision of the Permanent Health and Sports Commission, according to Art. 33 and Art. 34, from Rules applied by the National Agency for Evaluation & Accreditation (NAEA) and accepted by the Accreditation Council of NAEA (20.10.2016) Criteria for program accreditation of professional direction in accordance with assurance standards and guidelines quality in the European area of higher education /ESG/ - part 1 /1-10/ and in the sense of Art. 78, para. 3 of HVO / Table 5 / , visited the "Vasil Levski" in the period 25.10.2022 . - 28 . 10. 202 2 , held meetings with the leadership of the university, with teachers, students, doctoral students and users of shots. The group got acquainted with the study plans and programs, with the conditions of training.

RESULTS

After analyzing the facts and circumstances, reflected in the self-assessment report of the "Vasil Levski" NSA and the inspection for fulfillment of the criteria for program accreditation of professional direction 7. 5 . "Health Care" , EG **found the** following:

1. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE PREVIOUS ACCREDITATION

chronology of the procedure reveals that with a letter from NAOA, ex. No. 933/15.09.2015 and entry No. 924/18.09.2015 (*Appendix 1*) National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski" was notified by NAOA that at its meeting held on 30.06.2015, with protocol No. 25, the Standing Committee on Health and Sports gave program accreditation of a professional direction 7.5. HEALTH CARE at the

"Vasil Levski" National Sports Academy on the basis of a score of 9.20 (nine whole and twenty hundredths) for:

Master's degree

Kinesitherapy and rehabilitation – regular form of training;

SPA culture, hydro, litho and thalasso practices - regular and extramural form of education.

The validity period of the accreditation is 6 (six) years, in accordance with Art. 79 (4), item 1 of the Bulgarian law for Higher education (ZVO).

The maximum **total capacity** for the professional field 7.5. HEALTH CARE at the National Sports Academy for the two **Master** programs: "SPA culture, hydro, litho and thalasso practices" and "Kinesitherapy and rehabilitation" - **a total of 120 students**, full-time and by correspondence educational forms.

The Standing Committee formulates a recommendation that refers to the following : "**To reduce the number of freely elective subjects for the two master's programs**". The deadline for implementation is: September 2015.

Evidence of the implementation of the recommendation is contained in the Report for the completion of the mandatory recommendations of the Accreditation Council from the previous program accreditation on professional direction 7. 5 Health care of the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski" and from the procedures for post-accreditation monitoring and control (SANK).

of PKZS to grant program accreditation to professional direction 7.5. HEALTH CARE at the Vasil Levski National Sports Academy , the institution is taking action to implement the recommendations.

The faculty council creates a commission for the implementation of the NAOA recommendations, which consists of three experts with a chairman - the Dean of the Faculty of Kinesitherapy, Tourism and Sports Animation (FKTTSA) and members - the heads of the departmental Program Council and for the Master's program and "Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation" and "Spa culture, hydro, litho and thalasso practices" , and one PhD student . The members of this committee supervise the analyzes by the teaching teams on the implementation of the recommendations (Appendix 7).

At its meeting held on 10.11.2015, protocol No. 73 (Appendix 9), based on the report of the Head of the Program Council from the master's program "Spa culture, hydro, litho and thalasso practices", the Faculty Council of the KTTSA faculty made specific proposals and a decision to reduce electives.

The subsequent analysis of the provided protocols showed that as of November 11, 2015, the number of elective subjects from the master's program "Spa culture, hydro, litho and thalasso practices" was reduced with the following three subjects (*Appendix 10*) : *Tourism and orientation* -

1 ECTS - 2 semester; SPA-time at home - 1 ECTS - 5 semester; Artistic Swimming – 1 ECTS – 5 semester.

According to a similar procedure, at the meeting of the Faculty Council on KTTSA, held on 08.10.2015, protocol No. 72 (Appendix 7) , a decision was made to create a committee on the recommendations of the NAOA consisting of three experts with the chairman - the Dean of the Faculty of KTTSA and members - the Head of the Program Board of the master's program "Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation " and one doctoral student. Later, at its meeting held on 10.11.2015, protocol No. 73 (Appendix 9), according to the report of the Head of the Program Council from the master's program "Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation", the Faculty Council of the KTTSA Faculty gives specific proposals and a decision for reduction of electives. The analysis of the provided protocols showed that as of November 11, 2015, the number of elective subjects from the master's program "Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation" was reduced by the following five subjects (Appendix 15): *Informatics, analysis and modeling of movements - 1 ECTS - 1 semester ; Basics of soft tissue mobilization – 1 ECTS – 1 semester; Application of orthotics and prosthetics in CT – 1 ECTS – 2 semester; CT in juvenile hypertension – 1 ECTS – 4 semester; Nutrition, metabolism and biostimulation in old age – 1 ECTS – 4 semester.*

Everything that follows in the procedures for post-accreditation monitoring and control was carried out in full compliance with the requirements of the Higher Education Institution and the National Academy of Medical Sciences, which gives the Accreditation Council a reason to state that: **"Vasil Levski" National Sports Academy** has fulfilled the recommendation formulated by the decision of the Standing Committee on health care and sports from 30.06.2015 (protocol 25) with program accreditation of professional direction 7.5 "Health care" with master's programs, with a total score of 9.20 (nine whole and twenty hundredths).

2. Verification of the fulfillment of the program criteria crediting in accordance with the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European area for higher education /ESG/ - part 1 /1-10/ and in the sense of art. 78, para. 3 of the Higher Education Act /Table 5/, adopted by the AC of NAOA on 20.10.2016.

STANDARD 1. QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICY

Criterion 1.1. When conducting training in PN 7.5, a policy for ensuring a culture of quality is maintained and developed, which is made public and is part of the strategic management of the Vasil Levski Higher School of Sports and Physical Higher Education

For educational, scientific and practical activities in Professional field 7.5. *Health care* in the National Academy of Sciences and the Faculty of " Public Health, Health Care and Tourism" , which is the successor of the until recently functioning Kinezytherapy, Tourism and Sports animation (KTTSA), targeted organizational, cognitive and informational efforts are made and events are organized in support of politics for achieve a culture of quality. The applied policy has an official

status and is available to all interested parties by publishing it on the NSA "Vasil Levski" website (www.nsa.bg) .

In support of the presented summary in the self-assessment report, according to this criterion, sufficient evidence is provided. For leading EGs, it defines:

- NSA "Vasil Levski" is the only higher education institution in the country with proven scientific expertise in the Recreation Industry, which allows it to win , for the first time in the history of Bulgarian humanitarian studies, a European project worth 30 million for the construction of a Center of Excellence (OP ONIR , Axis 1, priority 4, in the 2014–2020 programming period).

- In Mon 7.5. Health care NSA is the only educational institution of its kind with accredited programs in OCS "master" and ONS "doctor", which prepare highly qualified specialists for all management and operational levels.

- NSA "Vasil Levski" is a center where the most significant scientific developments are carried out in PN 7.5. Health care, affecting the methodology and innovations for the Recreational Industry and Niche tourism. Since February 2018, Vasil Levski NSA has been a partner in a contracted project (OP ONIR) for the construction and development of the first Center of Excellence for Creative and Recreational Industries in Bulgaria - Heritage BG.

- The scientific expertise of the Vasil Levski NSA teams is responsible for the creation and development of the first scientific laboratory of its kind in Europe for "Social Innovations, Recreational Human Design and Niche Tourism". The scientific laboratory will be put into full operation after the restoration of the Ovcha Kupel bath in the city of Sofia (2023).

- One of the significant events for the "Vasil Levski" NSA is the receipt of program accreditation of professional direction 7.5. Health care at the Faculty of Kinesitherapy, Tourism and Sports Animation (now the Faculty of Public Health, Health Care and Tourism) in 2015 (Appendix 1). The received rating - 9.2, at the highest possible 10, is among the highest received by PN 7.5. Health care in Bulgaria.

- The high expert precision in the development of the programs and the detailing of the module content in FOZZGT contributes to the accreditation of a new master's program in the OCS "master" in PN. 7.6. Sport: "SPA culture, eastern and aqua practices" (aimed at the potential of recreational motor activity and modeling programs in an aquatic environment).

Findings according to criterion 1.1 .

The EG considers that the presented self-assessment report is the result of the efforts of the academic community and primarily of the Program Councils, which are aimed at increasing the quality of the education offered in PN 7.5. Health care of the NSA "Vasil Levski". The Academy maintains and develops a policy to ensure a culture of quality, which is publicized and is part of the strategic management of the Vasil Levski National Academy of Sciences .

According to 1.1.1. The training of the students is carried out according to the requirements for the educational and qualification degree "master" and is in accordance with the educational mission, goals and tasks of the accredited professional direction 7.5. Health care at Vasil Levski NSA

master's programs **"Physical therapy and rehabilitation"** and **"SPA culture, hydro, litho and thalasso practices"** are fully in line with the priorities in the current policies of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science of the Ministry of Education and Culture for the creation of personnel to carry out health prevention in the Wellness&SPA&Thalasso industry and to contribute to improving the quality of life of Bulgarian citizens and foreign guests and tourists .

The higher school in its self-evaluation report proves that the accreditation of the innovative programs was strongly influenced by the publicly expressed expert opinion of the Ministry of Health on the need for health prevention and promotion of health culture among citizens in Bulgaria and Europe.

Training of students in a professional direction 7.5. Health care is conducted in accordance with HVO and the established policies and procedures developed at Vasil Levski National Academy of Sciences to ensure high quality education, accessible to the public and reflecting the links between scientific research, on the one hand, and training and teaching, on the other.

Findings under 1.1.1:

EG finds that the policy for ensuring a culture of quality in the professional field is part of the strategic management of the Academy, the purpose of which was to develop the main document **"Mission, vision and strategy for the development of the National Academy of Sciences Vasil Levski"** (Appendix 9), the content on which it was prepared on the basis of the publicly disclosed documents . Among them, the statement on the development of the NSA in a period of 15-20 years stands out with particular relevance - Decision of the AC, Protocol No. 17/19.10.2017 (*Appendix 10*).

According to 1 .1.2. The overall activity of the "Health care" professional direction is subordinated to the institutional quality system, without neglecting its specifics

At Vasil Levski National Academy of Sciences, there is a purposefully built structure for the implementation of the Internal Quality System at the level of departments, faculties and rector's management. The strategic management of the system is carried out by the Center for the Quality of Education and Accreditation - TSKOA (<http://nsa.bg/bg/page,1519>) and the Expert Council ¹of the NSA "Vasil Levski" on the Quality of Education and Accreditation - EU under the KOA (<http://nsa.bg/bg/page,1519>). The main document that guides quality control activities is the Quality **Manual** (<http://nsa.bg/bg/page,1521>). An integral part of the quality system are developed and continuously updated the necessary normative documents (2 regulations, 11 rules and 1 manual) for the implementation of the educational activity. These documents also guide the activities of

¹ The Academic Work Expert Council and the Master's Program Program Council include the vice-rector, qualified teachers from the program, external experts from MT, MES, MMS and consultants from the National Tourism Board at MT.

FOZZGT. EG found that they are constantly updated depending on changes to central documents of the Ministry of Education and Culture or intra-university needs of the Academy and FOZZGT.

Guided by the fact that *study programs* are an important determinant of the quality of education in master's programs, in FOZZGT (respectively the departments), changes are regularly made in the study content within the allowed 10% of the total number of hours according to the Ordinance on State Educational Requirements (NDOI) and the Credit Transfer Ordinance (NTC). They were discussed and approved by the program councils (PC), the departments (CS) and the faculty councils (FS).

Another objective piece of information that we consider to be an important indicator of quality is the effectiveness of the overall training of the students in the master's programs at the exit - measured by their graduation. For the period 2014–2020 in PN 7.5. A total of 202 students graduated from health care (according to data declared in the self-assessment report). 7 of them are enrolled in the ONS "Doctor", of which three have successfully defended. The distribution by years and educational qualifications is presented in the table. 3 and 4.

Table 3. Graduated students from the Master's program "Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation" during the accreditation period

Major/Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
State Examination	28	24	19	9	13	108
With thesis defense	4	1	3	5	2	
Percentages graduated	94%	96%	92%	92%	98%	
Percentages lagging	6%	4%	8%	8%	2%	
Average grade from the State Exam	5.18	5.29	5.57	5.49	5.65	

Table 4. Graduated students in OKS "master" in the program "SPA culture, hydro, litho and thalasso practices"

Major/Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Students	27	19	13	3	9	71
Percentages graduated	73%	81%	86%	90%	90%	
Percentages lagging	32%	27%	19%	14%	10%	
Average grade from the State Exam	5.11	5.23	5.29	5.54	5.61	

The high percentage of graduated students from PN 7.5 can be seen. Health care and the exponential rise of the average GPA. Another indicator of quality is competitiveness - the "SPA culture, hydro, litho and thalasso practices" program at the National Academy of Sciences has a

competitive one at the MU - Varna. The analysis of the curricula of similar Master's modules serving the expectations of the tourism business shows a repetition of modules (more than 50%) from the curricula of rehabilitators and massage therapists at the "professional bachelor" level. This fact is the basis of the motivation of a number of young specialists from Varna to choose their master's studies at the National Academy of Sciences, in the "SPA culture, hydro, litho and thalasso practices" program.

Given the interest and desire of the students, the credits (from 1 to 2) of the second module (massage techniques) have been increased. The required number of credits for the optional disciplines have been reduced from 8 to 7 ECTS credits, and the number of modules from which one can choose from 23 to 18. The requirements for acquiring the qualification have been specified in the qualification characteristics.

During the reporting period, the quality of the learning process in the master's programs was permanently in the focus of attention of the leadership of the Academy and the Ministry of Education and Culture. The discussed issues and problems are reflected in the documents archived in appendices: activities for the implementation of the recommendations made during the program accreditation; self-assessment report on the implementation of the recommendations made during the 2015 program accreditation; the annual reports of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of "Public Health, Healthcare and Tourism" from 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 (Appendix 14); conducted internal audits (Appendix 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20). The cited documents contain the evidence of the periodic self-assessment of the work performed in the institution in the context of the requirements of the NAOA. For example, during the post-accreditation period, specific actions were taken in the "Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation" master's program in connection with the implementation of the NAOA recommendations and further optimization of the curriculum. The study documentation was updated in the following main directions: *change in the name of the master's program from "Kinesitherapy and rehabilitation" to "Physical therapy and rehabilitation"; updating the teaching staff and the recommended literature in the study programs; reducing the number of elective subjects.*

DISCOUSSION

In the study documentation of the "SPA culture, hydro, litho and thalasso practices" master's program, updating measures were also carried out in the main directions: *reducing the number of optional subjects in the curriculum from 9 to 4; inclusion in the curriculum of new optional and specialized disciplines; updating the thematic content of part of the study disciplines by the leading teachers.*

Findings under 1.1.2. In the professional field 7.5. Health care has established standards and rules for periodic self-assessment of the activity, which is part of the system for the quality of education at the "Vasil Levski" NSA. A procedure for conducting an internal audit was developed and publicly announced (<http://nsa.bg/bg/page,2048>), which was approved by a decision of the

internal evaluation group and it clearly describes the specific goals, stages, the method of conducting and reporting the results of the internal audit.

According to 1.1.3. VU builds and implements a policy to realize the interrelationship between scientific research and education within the national and institutional context

Research activity is one of the main priorities in the activity of the professional direction. Scientific research activity at Vasil Levski NSA is regulated by the following regulatory documents: Strategy for scientific activity (<http://nsa.bg/bg/page,717>); Rules for the structure and activity of the Vasil Levski NSA (<http://nsa.bg/bg/page,1870>); Rules for the terms and conditions for planning, distribution and spending of the funds allocated purposefully from the state budget for scientific or artistic activity in the Vasil Levski National Sports Academy (<http://nsa.bg/bg/page,717>); Code of Ethics for Scientific Research (<http://nsa.bg/bg/page,717>) and Regulations for the Organization and Activities of the Center for Scientific and Applied Activity in Sports (<http://nsa.bg/bg/page,1702>) .

CONCLUSION

The specified documents have been developed in accordance with the legal and regulatory requirements of the state and in this way a solid regulatory base has been created for the development of research activities in the professional direction. The following approaches are applied as part of the NSA implementation at the Public health, health care and tourism Faculty OF PUBLIC HEALTH, HEALTH CARE AND TOURISM (FOZZGT) policy:

✓ In the curricula of the individual academic disciplines, it is provided - mainly in the so-called independent work to prepare students - development of various genres of scientific communication, such as essays and term papers, analytical projects, research of literary sources, content analysis, comparison of results of scientific and practical experiments and their sustainability and expediency, etc.

✓ The Master's program "Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation" includes two disciplines aimed at scientific research work.

✓ In conducting teaching-methodical practices, the accumulated knowledge from the scientific research of the teaching staff from the various scientific activities is applied. On this basis, methodological guides and textbooks of the teaching staff were developed, mainly for profiling disciplines.

✓ Students actively participate with scientific reports and announcements in scientific conferences and publication in the newly created scientific journal, included in the reference list of NACID - Smart Innovations in the Recreational & Wellness Industry and Niche Tourism (<https://scjournalbg.globalwaterhealth.org/>) and "Neurosonology and cerebral hemodynamics" (<http://www.neurosonology-bg.com/izdania/spisanie.html>).

Note:

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Prof. Bistra Dimitrova, D. Sc.

National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski"

Faculty of Public Health, Health Care and Tourism,

Bulgaria, Sofia, Studentski grad, 1700,

E-mail: dimitrova.bistra@yahoo.com