Practical and labour-market oriented vocational education is the core of the reform of the Bulgarian vocational education system and the goal of this project. As part of its enlargement contribution, Switzerland is supporting Bulgaria in establishing a dual vocational education and training system that builds on the Swiss model and Swiss expertise. Vocational training will be coupled with in-company training and have a greater focus on practical job skills. As a result, the workforce will be better qualified and able to meet market demands, which will contribute to the reduction of youth unemployment in Bulgaria.

Vocational schools in Bulgaria offer their students theoretical and practical training without knowing what exactly Bulgarian businesses expect from their graduates or how the labour market is evolving. This can lead to a gap between the skills taught in vocational education and training programmes and what businesses expect from graduates, and consequently also to a high unemployment rate, particularly among young people who have not yet entered the job market.

As part of the project, young people in Bulgaria are being trained as dairy technologists in the My Day Bulgaria dairy factory.

DEVELOPING AND TESTING THE MODELS

The project contributes to the reform of the Bulgarian vocational education and training system by introducing principles from Switzerland’s dual system adapted to the local context. Swiss experts assist Bulgarian experts in developing new vocational education and training programmes. This is done in close collaboration with vocational schools and with businesses operating in specific sectors. Teachers and instructors in the businesses concerned then undergo advanced training courses to enable them to teach according to the new curricula. A key aspect is to apply in the workplace what students learn in school. The new programme is then implemented at every stage of vocational education and training. At the beginning of the 2015 school year, two vocational schools, working in partnership with about 10 companies, began training apprentice mechanics and technicians in the manufacture of dairy products.
Reforming the education system into an apprenticeship-based system is a challenge in some respects because it involves numerous stakeholders, including several ministries and partners in the education and private sectors. In Bulgaria, where a university education is considered to be the only path to professional success, it is also necessary to show the benefits of this new system and to change perceptions. Therefore, promoting the dual vocational education and training system among decision-makers, the private sector, schools, parents and pupils is a key priority of the project.

By 2019 curricula for at least 10 trades, which will benefit 1,200 apprentices, will be developed as part of the project. Swiss experts will transfer their skills and expertise to Bulgarian experts to enable them to develop new vocational education and training programmes independently.

These initial experiences must be accompanied by legislative changes to facilitate the introduction of the dual vocational education and training system into the Bulgarian vocational education system. Thus, the experience gained throughout the project will help implement the national strategy the government adopted in 2014 and encourage the replication on a much wider scale of the dual vocational education and training model developed with Switzerland’s support.