



EDUCATION REFORM INITIATIVE OF SOUTH
EASTERN EUROPE
(ERI SEE)
WORK PROGRAMME
2022 – 2023

By Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe Secretariat
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ERI SEE WORK PROGRAMME 2022 - 2023ⁱ

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INTRODUCTION

About Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe

Back in early 21st century, as a part of the stabilisation process in the South Eastern Europe, the Stabilisation and Association Agreement for South Eastern Europe, heavily supported by the Enhanced Graz Process¹, was signed in 2003. The wider political framework was aimed at creating a progressive partnership between the European Union and Western Balkan economies with a view of stabilising the region and establishing a free-trade area. As a part of the stabilisation process, it was important to create a strategic regional framework of cooperation in the field of education and training, for which the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE) was initiated. The more concrete areas and modes of cooperation were defined by several Memoranda signed further on:

- Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministers of Education and Higher Education of South Eastern Europe (Nicosia, 2003), on the cooperation in the field of education and signed by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia;
- The Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministers Responsible for Education, Science and Research in South Eastern Europe, signed in 2007 in Istanbul by Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Provisional Institutions of Self-Government of Kosovo, Montenegro and Romania, which renewed the commitment to regional cooperation in education, for mutual benefit, encompassing all aspect of lifelong learning, science and research. This Memorandum insisted on regional cooperation activities considering relevant EU and European developments and trends in education, science and research, but also close links to the national context and priorities of the signatory countries, also by involving the relevant stakeholders;
- And finally, Memorandum of Understanding on the Role and Organisation of the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (Brdo, 2010), which reiterated the commitments of signatory parties (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro and Serbia – ERI SEE member countries) to regional cooperation in the EU accession process and sustainable economic development. The Brdo Memorandum recognized the ERI SEE achievements done so far, and also gave a clear and more operational principles of functioning of ERI SEE and ERI SEE Secretariat as the operational body, at day-to-day level implementing the strategic decisions made by the ministries of education as founders of the ERI SEE. This Memorandum forms the basis of today's operation, status and structure of ERI SEE.

Following the Memorandum of Understanding (Brdo, 2010) and expression of interest from the Serbian Government, the seat of the Agency for Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe,

¹ The Graz Process was initiated under the Austrian EU presidency in 1998. It was aimed at promoting democratic and peaceful development in South Eastern Europe by supporting and co-ordinating educational co-operation projects in the region

functioning in Zagreb under the Croatian jurisdiction, was transferred to Serbia and the new Secretariat for Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe was started being developed, in the form of a international organisation, first as the Provisional Secretariat within the Centre for Education Policy. After the *Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and other members of the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe on the seat of the Secretariat of the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe* (hereinafter the Host-country agreement) was signed by all the ERI SEE member countries (in the period from 2013 to 2015), which was ratified in December 2017. Finalizing the procedure of entering into force of the Host-country Agreement, official legal status of the Secretariat, as an international organisation, support of the Government of the Host Country to the Secretariat and conditions necessary for effective performance, and other relevant issues deriving from the Secretariat's status, were regulated.

The accompanying financial and operational procedures were completed in January 2018, from when the Secretariat functions as an independent international organization seated in Belgrade, Serbia. The Secretariat is listed and registered in the Diplomatic protocol and holds the status of a diplomatic mission, with its international staff holding diplomatic status.

Short overview of the 2021

2021 was the second pandemic year in a row. The experience gained throughout 2020 in tackling the disease and tackling business and operation under the newly established rules and modes posed a great benefit in planning and organizing work in 2021. The use of innovative approaches and methods continued, resulting in an increase of technical readiness and skills, and as a regular practice, most events are currently organized in a hybrid mode. As a consequence of the option of both on-line and off-line participation, the participation numbers in events ERI SEE organized have increased, the range of participants is more varied and the reach of the events is wider.

When it comes to the areas of intervention, ERI SEE was active in the area of vocational education and training (one of the ERI SEE priority areas), implemented all the activities envisaged by the TO REGOS project (*Towards Regionally-based Occupational Standards*) and brought them to a successful closure in August 2021. At the same time, a number of consultative meetings were held with the regional partners dealing with the VET (VET agencies and chambers of commerce) for the preparation of the new regional project. The new project proposal (Enhancements in the quality of education and training in South Eastern Europe – EQET SEE) was prepared, discussed, negotiated and submitted to the donor and finally approved in November 2021. The closure of one project, and beginning of another one, was also marked by the strong commitment from regional partners to regional cooperation, improvements in education and training, exchange of expertise and development of joint regional outputs. The two regional networks - South Eastern European Vocational Education and Training (SEE VET) Network (network of VET agencies from the region) and Western Balkans Alliance for Work-based Learning (WBA4WBL) (association of VET centres and chambers of commerce from the region) proved to be reliable, responsible and committed partners which serve as an example for other regional networks coordinated by ERI SEE.

In the area of quality assurance in pre-tertiary education (another ERI SEE priority area), the ERI SEE planned its activities as a part of the new regional project, EQET SEE, mentioned above. A number of consultative events were organized throughout the 2021., to discuss details of the goals, activities and implementation arrangements related to the quality assurance aspects. The project will be dealing, in its second component, with the quality assurance – external evaluation systems in the region and support to external evaluators. The project does not only intend to make improvements in the systems and methodologies of external evaluation, and in the work of external evaluators, but also emphasizes the importance of quality culture building in the region in the field of education and training. It also aims to contribute to a closer cooperation among the quality agencies themselves and strengthening of their network (Regional group of experts in quality assurance in pre-tertiary education).

For the teacher education and training priority, the ERI SEE organized two online events supporting education and training systems in their response to COVID-19 – one in cooperation with the Serbian Institute for the improvements in education (on project-based on-line learning); and the other in cooperation with the European Training Foundation (on how to organize blended learning). Another,

event, in a blended format, was organized by ERI SEE, European Training Foundation (ETF) and Austrian Agency for Education and Internationalisation (OeAD), on the subject of digital quality culture. In addition, a publication on digital, on-line and blended teaching and learning was published by the ERI SEE, offering concrete tools and checklists to support schools in their digital transformation.

In the area of higher education (also a priority area for ERI SEE), ERI SEE continued its cooperation with the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) on the subject of recognition of higher education qualifications. Five regional on-line meetings were organized, gathering the regional working group for recognition of academic qualifications, resulting in the development of the proposal for the Regional Agreement for the Recognition of Academic Qualifications in the Western Balkans. The proposal was operationally agreed and finalized among the 6 economies and forwarded to highest levels decision makers for their further proceedings. In addition, the quality assurance systems in higher education, managed by the quality assurance agencies, were supported by external studies and recommendations for improvements in line with the European Standards and Guidelines.

The ERI SEE team increased from 2.5 to 3.5 FTE, and strategic management structure – the ERI SEE Governing Board, composed of representatives of ministries of education from ERI SEE participating countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia), and partner institutions OeAD and RCC, continuously offered their support in expert, policy, political and strategic form to ERI SEE activities and developments.

To conclude, the 2021 was a successful year which saw the expansion of the regional cooperation, strengthening of international partnerships with European Training Foundation (ETF), Austrian Agency for Education and Internationalization (OeAD), Western Balkans 6 Chambers Investment Forum (WB6 CIF) and Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), increased ERI SEE visibility, successful closure of one regional project and the beginning of a new one.

I STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

1.1. Strategic context

The strategic context for ERI SEE activities is shaped by the strategic priorities defined by the ERI SEE member states (in their Economic Reform Programmes and other relevant strategic documents in the area of education and training). Also, the European Commission, with its regular Country reports and recommendations, offer a solid analysis of needed actions. Last but not least, the Berlin process, as a political instrument improving and intensifying regional cooperation through connecting Western Balkans 6 economies (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) with EU member states, thus accelerating the region's closer alignment with the EU, has proven as an important strategic pointer of where the region wants to go – towards the establishment of the Common Regional Market. The „how“ part – the Common Regional Market Action Plan, offers some relevant actions for regional cooperation in the field of education and training, especially in the part dealing with higher education systems and qualifications, as the source of the highly qualified labour marked force in the region.

For the purpose of this Work Programme 2022 – 23, the Economic Reform Programmes of ERI SEE Member states have been consulted, together with the EC country reports recommendations, as well as Common Regional Market Action Plan. The Strategic documents forming the underlying basis for this Work Programme are listed in Annex 1.

1.2. ERI SEE Governing Board

The strategic management of the ERI SEE is in the hands of the ERI SEE Governing Board, composed of the representatives of ministries of education from 7 ERI SEE Member Countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, signatories of the Memorandum of Understanding on the Role and Organisation of the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (Brdo, 2010). The meetings of the Governing Board are held minimum 2 times a year and are used for strategic discussions and decisions, as well as content consultations and inputs used in the development of the Work Programme and Financial Plan.

ERI SEE Governing Board is in charge of monitoring whether the ERI SEE Secretariat, with its plans and activities, supports the mission of the ERI SEE: facilitation of cooperation at regional level, considering relevant European developments and trends in education and training, while at the same time keeping a close link to national context and priorities. ERI SEE thus contributes to sustainable economic developments and sustainable education and training reforms at national and regional levels.

The ERI SEE Governing Board also supports the ERI SEE vision – to provide the implementation framework for regional cooperation in the area of education and training, by being a reliable, innovative and supportive partner in its members' developments on the EU accession pathways and beyond.

In 2022, 2 governing meetings of the ERI SEE Governing Board meeting are planned, with continuous communication and consultations in between these meetings.

1.3. Cooperation with partner organizations

In 2022 and 23 the ERI SEE plans to continue cooperation with relevant and reliable international partners - Austrian Agency for Education and Internationalization (OeAD), European Training Foundation (ETF), Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and Western Balkans 6 Chambers Investment Forum (WB6 CIF).

Cooperation with the OeAD is formalized every year through the Cooperation Agreement that specifies priority areas (primarily VET), roles and obligations, and financial contributions for the realization of these roles.

In 2021, the Declaration of Intent for 2022 was signed between European Training Foundation and ERI SEE for the 3rd time in a row. The Declaration recognizes different but complementary roles ETF and ERI SEE play in the region in supporting developments in education and training systems and plans to build on these roles through joint activities.

In addition, with the agreed Common Regional Market Action Plan and identified relevant areas in higher education, the work of RCC and ERI SEE is also intensifying through the activities of the Joint ERI SEE – RCC Working Group for Recognition of Academic Qualifications.

In 2021, for the period of 2022 and beyond, the Memorandum of understanding was signed between the Western Balkans 6 Chambers Investment Forum and ERI SEE, defining cooperation within the scope of the EQET SEE project, but also beyond, in different forms of peer learning, knowledge exchanges, seminars, conferences etc.

Cooperation with other international bodies, such as Austrian Development Cooperation, GIZ, Swiss Development Cooperation, is also going to continue through information sharing and participation at various events.

1.4. Internal organization and visibility

In 2022 - 23 ERI SEE Secretariat will, in its day-to-day activities, rely on the 3.5 FTE. Some expert activities resulting in expert intellectual products, such as Guidelines on cross cutting issues within the EQET SEE project, are planned to be sub-contracted externally.

The focus of internal organisation will be on internal quality management and increase in the visibility of ERI SEE.

The quality of the internal processes is continuously being improved. The Secretariat is strongly committed to building the quality culture within its own organizations, which implies the continuous revision of internal processes to achieve the maximum clarity, transparency and efficiency. During 2022 the internal processes, checklists and forms will be reviewed to address the expansion of the Secretariat and new developments (new staff, new projects and new activities).

In order to increase its visibility, ERI SEE Secretariat plans to develop a new EQET SEE project site, and connect the current project sites (www.wba4wbl.com, www.wb-qualification.org) with the main www.erisee.org site in a more visible manner. More attention will be placed on cooperation with partners and their sharing of ERI SEE news on their institutional websites to achieve a wider dissemination effect. The practice of publishing the annual newsletter with the relevant updates on the ERI SEE processes and activities will be continued, and the newsletter will be distributed to the mailing list of around 2000 regional and international decision-makers and education experts with wide networks and further dissemination potential. The original mailing list consisted of 200 e-mails, which has, in 3 years, increased 10-fold. This is an important indicator of continuous growth in the visibility and perception of ERI SEE in the region, the trend of which is expected to continue in 2022 and 2023.

II THEMATIC AREAS OF INTERVENTION

Aligned with the regional and national priorities, set by strategic documents of the ERI SEE member countries (please see Annex 1. Strategic documents), the ERI SEE areas of intervention in 2022 and 2023 will remain consistent and focus on:

1. Vocational education and training, and increasing employability through contributing to cooperation between education and business sector.
1. Higher education, and supporting quality assurance systems and facilitating recognition of academic recognition
2. General education, and supporting quality assurance systems and improvements in teacher education and training.

2.1 Vocational education and training

Highlights for 2022: The implementation of the 3-year regional project Enhancements in the quality of education and training in SEE – EQET SEE project, with the allocated budget of around 2 mill EUR, continues for the period 2021 - 2024. The project component dealing with Vocational Education and Training focuses on development of regionally based occupational and qualification standards, national curricula, and supportive actions for teachers and instructors for the implementation of these curricula and their work-based learning elements.

In spite of continuous efforts invested by national and international communities, the youth unemployment remains one of the most challenging areas in the Western Balkans, intensified by commonly identified issue of skills mismatch. The solutions include, among others, closer cooperation between the education and business sector in defining the missing skills and developing occupational standard in close cooperation. This is to ensure that the identified missing skills are later, in the process of curricula development, integrated into the curricula and taken into account when deciding on the learning outcomes. The strategic framework for ERI SEE's activities in this particular area is given by national strategic documents and relevant Economic Reform Programs and European Commission recommendations.

The ERI SEE's involvement in these aspects will include the implementation of the EQET SEE project, which is the continuation and expansion of the Towards regionally based occupational standards (TO REGOS), finalized in 2021. Both are funded by the Austrian Development Agency through funds of Austrian Development Cooperation.

Throughout this 3-year project, and in cooperation with the VET agencies and chambers of commerce from the region, the regionally-based occupational standards and regionally-based qualifications standards will be produced (in the agricultural and metal sectors), modified to national contexts and specificities and transferred into the national curricula. After that, supportive measures will be

implemented, ensuring successful implementation of the curricula, through trainings for teachers and company instructors and development of teaching and learning materials.

To make the project a success, some preliminary actions were completed prior to the start of the project, such as regional consultations on the identification of sectors and occupations with the regional development potential and mobility needs; reaching an agreement on the occupations and qualifications to be addressed within the project and defining the framework methodology as the basis for the regional work.

The project will contribute to the enhancement of the employability and labour mobility of young people (aged 14 – 18) by investing in quality and labour market relevance of VET in the SEE region. As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons of high unemployment rates is the inadequacy of the education systems to deliver for the needs of the labour market. To change this, it is crucial to have strong cooperation mechanisms between private and public sector in VET, and strong involvement of adequate business representatives in the definition of the skills needed on the labour market. The project strongly relies on this.

In addition to enhancing cooperation mechanisms and involvement of businesses in the qualification standards development, another component within the project is making sure that the implementation of the curricula is high quality. This will be achieved by training within the pilot schools and companies and creating teaching and learning guidelines ensuring the integration of work-based learning components.

Thus, more concretely, the activities in 2022 and 2023 within this new planned project will include:

- Maintaining partnership between policy makers and policy implementers – national VET agencies from the region (SEE VET Net) and national chambers of commerce from the region (CIF) – sustaining Western Balkans Alliance for Work-based Learning
- Kick-off conference and networking, policy exchanges and peer learning among all the ERI SEE participating economies
- Regional fine-tuning meeting for the methodology of regionally-based qualifications standards
- Development of regionally-based occupational standards and qualification standards of relevance to the individual economies and the SEE region
- Development of national curricula, based on regionally-based standards of occupations and qualifications
- Integration of work-based learning into the national curricula
- Supporting the implementation of the new curricula through teaching and learning material and trainings for teachers and company instructors

The Western Balkans Alliance for Work-based learning is the implementing partner in the project at national level of individual economies; and at the same time the project envisages inclusion of the Moldovan representatives in regional activities, practice sharing, peer learning and policy consultations.

The partners in the process are VET agencies and Chambers of Commerce from the region, gathered under the Western Balkans Alliance for work-based learning (WBA4WBL), Western Balkans Chambers Investment Forum and OeAD.

The project will also be strategically supported by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, and synergies with regional activities under the Danube Strategy (priority area 9, People and Skills, under the Ministry's authority) will be ensured.

OeAD is a strategic partner in the project and included in the strategic planning, but also in some implementation segments. It makes sure that the synergies with other projects in the region, expertise and best practices are shared across the region and throughout the project. OeAD is involved in both VET and QA areas – this refers to the Austrian experiences of high-quality VET and work-based learning, as well as quality assurance practices.

2.2 Higher Education

Highlights: Quality of higher education in the region is again in the focus of the ERI SEE activities: in partnership with Croatian Ministry of Education and Science, support to quality of recognition of higher education qualifications and data maintenance is going to be provided for the other ERI SEE countries; whereas in partnership with the North Macedonian Ministry of Education and Science an international conference on the quality of higher education in the South Eastern European region is going to be organized. Partnership with the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) continues in the activities regarding the implementation of the Common Regional Market Action Plan, and more specifically on the recognition of academic qualifications in the Western Balkans, supporting QA agencies in higher education in their preparation for membership in ENQA and registration in EQAR, and as a part of this, systematic collection, monitoring, analysis and publishing of data regarding accreditation status of higher education institutions.

The cooperation and peer learning between ERI SEE member, Croatia, as an EU member state and other ERI SEE members – candidate or potential candidates – is planned to be intensified in the areas of qualifications recognition, quality assurance and data collection and maintenance.

3 activities are planned as a particular way of support from Croatia to Western Balkans 6 and Moldova in this respect:

1. A study visit for the Western Balkan 6 economies to Croatia on the subject of data collection and maintenance. Croatia is, at the European level, seen as an example of good practice for its maintenance of the European Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR). The Croatian experiences could be most relevant for the establishment, collection, storing, merging and maintaining the data on accredited institutions and study programmes in the region, currently published at the www.wb-qualifications.org, and facing difficulties in timely updating.
2. As a back-to-back event to the study visit, a SEE regional meeting of NARIC centres is going to be organized, allowing members to discuss and agree on day-to-day operational challenges.
3. A peer-learning activity (in a hybrid format) on the topic of recognition of HE qualification.

As a sign of commitment to quality enhancements in higher education, an international conference on quality in higher education, funded by the North Macedonian Ministry of Education and organized in close cooperation between ERI SEE and the Ministry, is planned to be held in 2022. With the participation of relevant European and regional speakers, experts in the field of Bologna process, Quality assurance and Recognition, the event is planned to raise awareness of the current challenges and identify concrete joint steps to be taken to meet the quality standards. The event will be delivered in hybrid format and will include relevant guests from the EU and region.

In addition, a strong strategic framework for ERI SEE activities in this area is given by the Common Regional Market (CRM) 2021 – 2024 Action Plan, endorsed by the leaders of the Western Balkans 6 (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia), at the Berlin Process Summit held in June 2021, virtually in Berlin. During the Summit, EU Leaders voiced their strong support for the Western Balkans' EU perspective and expressed their determination to further intensify engagement at all levels to support the region's political and economic transformation, and leaders of the Western Balkans renewed their sustained commitment to inclusive regional cooperation as a fundamental factor for the Western Balkans' EU accession path.

The RCC, as the leading regional organisation mandated to facilitate the implementation of the Action Plan in the area of higher education and free movement of people and capital, is provided with the funding from the EC, while ERI SEE is included in specific actions in line with its scope of work and programme.

The focus in 2022 will be placed on

- Recognition of academic qualifications in the Western Balkans and enhanced quality of recognition of academic qualifications by 2023, through the implementation of the following activities in 2022:
 - o Endorsement of the Feasibility study for recognition of primary and secondary level qualifications,
 - o Endorsement of regional recommendations (including possible legal adjustments);
 - o Feasibility assessment for recognition of VET completed;
 - o Implementing negotiations on the WB Agreement on recognition of qualifications
 - o Regular meetings and trainings for ENIC/NARIC Centres;
 - o Expansion of Joint Information System (JIS) and Regional Recognition Database (RRD);
 - o Endorsement of the Expert guidelines on domestic qualifications framework (NQF) to facilitate recognition of academic qualifications implemented;
- Support all Western Balkans Quality Assurance Agencies for membership in ENQA and EQAR by 2024, through the following activities to be implemented in 2022:
 - o Endorsement of the Study on compliance with ESG
 - o Endorsement of the regional recommendations and development of an action plan
 - o Regular meetings of the QA Agencies' Network
 - o Supporting aligning with the ESG through bilateral and multilateral exchanges with partners with mature quality assurance systems

2.3 General Education

Highlights: The focus of ERI SEE work in this area will be on the implementation of the new regional project, Enhancements in quality of education and training in South Eastern Europe, where one of its components is dealing with the building of quality culture, adjustments of the QA frameworks, and development of standards, needs analysis and trainings of external evaluators, all at the pre-tertiary level. The project started in October 2021 and lasts until October 2024 with an allocated budget of around 2 mill EUR.

In the area of teacher education and training, focus will be put on the continuation and strengthening of the South Eastern European Teacher Education Network and organizing peer learning events, allowing for the exchange of knowledge, expertise and practices between the EU and regional experts.

The activities in the thematic area of general education are divided into two sub-groups:

- a. Quality assurance in pre-tertiary education
- b. Teacher Education and Training

The strategic documents of the South Eastern European economies emphasize the relevance of quality of education for the economic and social prosperity of their inhabitants. The increase in the quality of education is measured through the quality assurance instruments and external and internal evaluation, established in almost all ERI SEE economies on the one hand, and the investments in teachers and their skills through continuous professional development, on the other. These two instruments are seen as tools for the systemic enhancements in the education and training quality and present a cornerstone for ERI SEE's work in this area.

For the reason of assisting economies in systemic enhancements, as of 2018 ERI SEE has been gathering and coordinating two professional and expert groups from the region: Regional group of experts in QA in pre-tertiary education, and other the South Eastern European Teacher Education and Training Network (SEE TET Network). Both are composed of the representatives of relevant national bodies/agencies/institutes from all ERI SEE participating economies, mandated for the improvements in their respective areas.

Both expert groups have identified issues that need to be addressed further and in which regional cooperation can contribute to understanding and enhancing situations in their national contexts: the Regional group of experts in QA in general education identified the work of external evaluators and QA frameworks as key areas of interest; whereas the SEE TET Network has identified the digitalization and digital culture as their primary focus of further learning and exchanges.

The identified topics have been used as the basis for the planning of the regional project EQET SEE in its QA component, as well as for the activities of SEE TET Network in 2022 and 23.

2.3.1 Quality Assurance in Pre-tertiary Education

As mentioned earlier, increasing the quality of education, as a pre-requisite for a economic and social prosperity, is the strategic goal of all the economies in the region and the region as a whole. To address this issue, the economies in Albania, Kosovo*, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia have all established specific QA agencies in charge of external evaluation of pre-tertiary education, mandated to improve the education systems and assure their quality through objective, impartial and methodologically agreed ways. ERI SEE has gathered these agencies into the Regional group of experts in QA in general education, back in 2018 and they have been meeting and cooperating ever since. The group was also joined by Croatian and Bosnian and Herzegovinian representatives, even though the systems of quality assurance are arranged differently in these two countries- (In Croatia, the system of quality assurance relies on the external evaluation of knowledge, and not institutions, and pedagogical supervision of individual teachers. However, the system of external evaluation of institutions, which is at the core of the work of the ERI SEE regional work of experts, is not established. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the other hand, the systems are established at cantonal and entity levels and there is no one national coordination point or body with national mandate in this area).

As a result of continuous meetings held from 2018, the cooperation in this area has ripened enough for more intensive cooperation within a new regional project.

Therefore, within the previously mentioned Enhancements in Quality of Education and Training in South Eastern Europe (EQET SEE), the quality in education and training will be tackled through encouraging a more formative, or supportive approach to external evaluation, and a more cooperative approach between decision makers, policy implementers and practitioners. This is to result in a partnership atmosphere in external evaluation the purpose of which is not penalization or control, but continuous cycles of improvements. Through this approach, the quality culture will be promoted and embraced by the education and training institutions themselves.

On the other hand, the methodologies used in external evaluation cycles will be revised and discussed in order to reflect the needs to develop a sense of ownership among the education and training institutions and to reflect the needs of inclusive, digital and sustainable societies able to respond to new situations. The skills of external evaluators will be encouraged in this direction.

The more concrete activities supporting the development of the quality culture will include:

- Kick-off meeting, connecting policy makers, stakeholders and project partners for the networking, exchange of practices and peer learning
- Policy vision meeting
- Data management meeting, exploring potentials of data collected in the external evaluation processes for policy making and analysis
- Regional meetings regarding the competence standard of external evaluators
- National meeting for the adjustments of the regionally-agreed competence standard

- Needs analysis of the external evaluators
- Defining the standard of training for external evaluators
- Training external evaluators on relevant issues
- Analysis of existing QA frameworks, methodologies, and indicators
- Regionally-based recommendations for QA frameworks, methodologies and indicators

With this approach the project will target the way the external evaluation is perceived by schools, focusing on the benefits of external evaluation cycles, and consequently changing the understanding of the external evaluation and quality culture. The QA segment of the EQET SEE project is targeting both general and VET schools (secondary education) and the results of the project will, in its final year, be piloted on a number of regional schools.

It is also important to note that the European Training Foundation (ETF) and Standing International Conference of Inspectorates, the European association of inspectorates or quality agencies will be ERI SEE's partners in this component of the project and will contribute with their expertise and information sharing.

2.3.2 Teacher education and training

The work in the area of teacher education and training is going to rely on continuing the activities of the SEE Teacher Education and Training Network (SEE TET Network). This is the regional network composed of the representatives of the teacher education and training agencies and ministries from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, established in 2018 by ERI SEE and ETF and coordinated ever since. As of 2021, the SEE TET Network is also supported by the OeAD – Austrian Agency for Education and Internationalisation.

During the pandemic years, the ERI SEE offered support to the teacher education and training agencies in their response to organizing school provision under COVID-19 circumstances, and in organization of digital, on-line and blended forms of teaching and learning.

In 2022 the work of the SEE TET Network is planned to go further, exploring the potential of digital culture building.

The work in this area has already started in 2021, when experts from the EU Member State (Austria) presented the Austrian examples of development of digital teaching and learning provision with quality criteria and labels. Also, the subject of teacher education and training for digital excellence in adequate formats was recognized as relevant.

2 events, in a blended format, are planned for 2022, dealing with the above mentioned topics: how to build, strengthen and maintain digital culture in the education and training sectors, and how to support teachers in this process.

Annex 1. Strategic documents

In the paragraphs below, we relied on strategic documents currently available and up-to-date – main European Commission recommendations from the Country Reports, main structural reform priorities from Economic Reform Programmes 2022 relevant for education and skills, and national educational strategic document - when available, as well as information at the official website of the European Union – Eurydice portal².

Albania

The Economic Reform Programme (ERP) for Albania, 2021 – 2023³ lists structural reform priorities for Albania in the sector of education for the period of 2021 – 2023, which include:

- Finalisation and support to the implementation of the pre-university curricular reform, teacher training and employment
- Inclusive education
- Support the inclusiveness and equality in education
- Improving the quality and coverage of VET while ensuring linkages with the labour market

The European Commission assessment of the ERP for Albania identifies *Increasing innovation and skills of young people and adults to enhance employment* as one of the key challenges.

The European Commission recommendation within the Country Report Albania 2021⁴, within the Chapter 26 Education and Culture, are to:

- adopt the new strategy on education, covering all levels and ensuring the adequate financial protection as well as targeted public spending for the people affected by the earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic;
- finalise the implementing legislation of the VET Law and implement the Optimization Plan by 2022 to develop services and competences in line with the needs of the private sector at local level;
- adopt the National Youth Strategy for the period 2021-2026.

² https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/national-description_en

³ <https://www.financa.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Economic-Reform-Programme-2021-2023.pdf>

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/albania-report-2021_en

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Bosnia and Herzegovina 2021 Report⁵, European Commission working document, states that COVID-19 pandemic affected the education system with the closure of the schools and shift to online education without prior preparation and necessary infrastructure. Having only been partly addressed, the recommendations from the previous year remain relevant:

- ensure a fully functional system of (re-)accreditation of higher education institutions and study programmes across the country;
- ensure continued participation in international assessment studies (International Student Assessment – PISA, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study – TIMSS and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study – PIRLS);
- establish an inter-sectorial commission for the national qualification framework.

The Economic Reform Programme for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2021 – 2023⁶ for the area of education foresees economic measure of improving the link between education and the labour market. Improving the harmonization of education with the requirements of the labour market is the main goal of this reform measure, in order to provide educated and professional staff to the economy and increase the number of employed persons.

A state-level policy document setting priorities for developing higher education in Bosnia and Herzegovina for 2016-2026 was adopted in March 2016 and the *Republika Srpska* entity adopted its education development strategy for 2016-2021 in April 2016. At the level of the Federation, the Strategic directions of Higher Education Development in Bosnia and Herzegovina were adopted for the period 2012 – 2022.⁷, which reiterates the commitments to the principles of the Bologna Declaration and strategic goals contributing to the Bologna process implementation.

Priorities for 2016 – 2026 Higher Education Development in BiH⁸ include the main measures and activities that need to be implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina in order to strengthen the development of higher education on the one hand, and, on the other hand, achieve full inclusion in the European Higher Education Area. The priorities for the development of higher education are grouped into seven key areas: good governance and management, resources; the integration of the labor market and higher education; standards of qualifications, student experience, internationalization and statistics.

The Platform for development of preschool education in BiH for the period 2017 - 2022 was adopted - the Ministry of Civil Affairs of BiH, in cooperation with the competent educational authorities in BiH, in the period 2015-2016, with the support of UNICEF in BiH, worked intensively on the Platform

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/bosnia-and-herzegovina-report-2021_en

⁶ <http://www.dep.gov.ba/naslovna?id=2439>

⁷ http://fmon.gov.ba/Upload/Dokumenti/9fef4cd0-f57a-4b51-aaa0-aaeadd4da691_Strate%C5%A1ki%20pravci%20razvoja%20visokog%20obrazovanja.pdf

⁸ <http://www.sluzbenilist.ba/page/akt/e8wfEohz4nh78h77G7ohz4nh78h77yE>

document for the development of pre-school education in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the period 2017-2022.

The document Priorities in the integration of entrepreneurial learning and entrepreneurial key competences into the education systems of Bosnia and Herzegovina was adopted for the period 2020 - 2030⁹, stating the importance of introducing entrepreneurial behaviour early on.

Last but not least, the document Improvement of the quality and relevance of VET in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the light of Riga Conclusions, for the period of 2021 – 2030¹⁰, was adopted. The document recognizes VET as a generator of economic development and societal progress, since it enables the acquisition of skills relevant for the labour-market, stimulates employability, social inclusion and prosperity of an individual, but also of the society as a whole.

Croatia

The Council has assessed the 2021 Convergence Programme and the follow-up by Croatia to the Council Recommendation of 20 July 2020, concluding that the Council Recommendation on the 2020 National Reform Programme of Croatia¹¹ still remain valid and will be monitored throughout the European Semester annual cycle:

- Labour shortages have continually affected some sectors of the economy, mainly because of skills gaps. Promoting the acquisition of adequate skills, including digital skills, during initial education and training and later via re- and up-skilling could raise productivity and close skills gaps. The quality and inclusiveness of the education and training system need to be improved at all levels, and the curricular reform needs to continue. The introduction of digital education has already proven its value in this crisis; further development of infrastructure and material for digital education and training and of the digital skills of teachers, pupils and adults are needed.

The 2020 European Semester: Assessment of progress on structural reforms, prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances, and results of in-depth reviews under Regulation (EU) No 1176/2011¹² stresses that the quality of education in Croatia remains a challenge and even though the general education curricular reform has been rolled out in all schools and teacher training and mentoring is ongoing, there are concerns about the quality of teaching of the new curricula and the scope of the reform. VET programmes in Croatia do not offer sufficient workplace training, the pace of adoption of occupation and qualification standards is very slow, availability and quality of equipment for VET programmes is reduced and teacher trainings, particularly of vocational subjects, are deemed inadequate.

⁹ <http://www.sluzbenilist.ba/page/akt/RSjNohz4nh78h77BrEHKw=>

¹⁰ <https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/node/168218>

¹¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0511&from=EN>

¹² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1584545612721&uri=CELEX:52020SC0510>

In July 2021 the Government of the Republic of Croatia adopted the National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021-2026¹³.

In the area of education the focus is on: a) supporting structural reform of early childhood education and care, primary and secondary education, and b) modernisation of higher education.

Investments include: construction and reconstruction of kinder-gardens, primary schools (in order to enable one-shift classes and whole-day school approach), as well as construction and reconstruction of secondary schools. In the area of higher education investments are focused on digital transformation of higher education institutions, mainly digital infrastructure and equipment.

Moldova

The United Nations Partnership Framework for Sustainable Development 2018 - 2022 for Republic of Moldova¹⁴ states that Moldova has adopted numerous strategies to overcome key social challenges, including those in education.

In line with the SD4 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, Moldovan goals are, by 2030, to:

- substantially increase the number of young people and adults who have relevant skills for the labour-market;
- ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities and children in vulnerable situations;
- ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development;
- build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive, and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.

Ensuring quality education for all and promote lifelong learning opportunities is also one of the long-term objectives of the National Development Strategy „Moldova 2030“¹⁵

Montenegro

Montenegro 2021 Report¹⁶ by the European Commission recommends the following as a priority for the coming year:

- intensify reform efforts to improve inclusive education and access to quality education at all education levels;

¹³ https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/recovery-and-resilience-plan-croatia_en

¹⁴ <https://moldova.un.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/UNDAF%20Moldova%20EN.pdf>

¹⁵ <http://extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/mol191490.pdf>

¹⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/montenegro-report-2021_en

- adopt and start to implement the new strategy on early and preschool education 2021-2025, to help improve preschool enrolment and inclusivity for all children;
- establish an adequate monitoring and evaluation mechanism of practical learning, at both higher and VET level education.

The Economic Reform Programme 2021 - 2023¹⁷ envisages the following:

- Establishment of the system for continuous monitoring of the quality of apprenticeship at the employer's
- Reform of study programmes for bachelor and master studies with strong focus on apprenticeship

The European Commission assessment of the ERP for Montenegro identifies *Increasing employment, particularly of women and young people, and tackling long-term unemployment* as one of the key challenges.

Based on the EURIDICE report¹⁸, "the vision of the Montenegrin education system is to develop Montenegro as a society of knowledge, where education, as the key factor of economic and social development will be of high-quality, flexible, efficient, with the professional human resources who will have competitive knowledge, skills and competences and who will be qualified to take part in the labour market, where each individual has equal opportunities for personal and professional development. Most significant recommendations and steps which should ensure the sustainability of the education reform and enable the implementation of this vision are as follows:

1. Further development of social partnership and active involvement of partners in planning, organization and implementation of education and training, thus providing faster response to the labour market needs.
2. The improvements of flexibility of VET through development of modularized curricula based on vocational and key competences, which ensure wide basic vocational knowledge and which, by the means of elective modules, satisfy special interests and affinities of pupils.
3. The development of indicators for institution quality assessment, defining procedures for curricula evaluation, as well as the evaluation itself, will contribute to the improvement of quality of education.
4. Early school leaving prevention, taking into account its complexity and influence on individuals and society in general. Develop career guidance system for all types of education.
5. The improvement of initial and continuing professional training of teaching staff has been recognized as a key factor of education quality. Special attention will be dedicated to the education of teachers of practical training.

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.me/en/documents/993f6bc7-bace-4ec7-b49a-f58419ec9804>

¹⁸ https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/crna-gora/ongoing-reforms-and-policy-developments_en#:~:text=The%20vision%20of%20the%20Montenegrin,skills%20and%20competences%20and%20who

6. Finding out the way to involve local community representatives and employers in the financing of education to the possible extent, which should encourage better cooperation between school and local community.
7. Preparation for the implementation of a model of financing per capita, which would ensure more efficient expenditures, with greater autonomy of both school and local community. Developing role of school will be encouraged.
8. One of the priorities in the upcoming period has been defining of enrolment policy which will reflect labour market needs as well as Montenegrin mid-term and long-term development policy requirements, along with further work on the creation of relevant working conditions at schools, school equipment and teaching aids upgrading and development of textbooks and relevant learning materials.
9. International context will be taken into account in the envisaged activities.
10. Linking higher education and labour market and increasing entrepreneurial and innovation character of education,
11. The share of population with higher education degrees aged 30-34 should be at least 40% in 2020,
12. Establishing a model of lifelong learning based on a good international practice,
13. Research oriented higher education,
14. The National Qualification Framework will ensure the quality of qualifications, the connection and comparability of the outcomes, achieved through different learning types. When it comes to Teacher Education and Training, the 2017-2024 Strategy for teacher education¹⁹ has the objective to create policies and practices of initial and continuous teacher education and training, which will offer support to teachers in performing their complex role as educator, on whose work the quality, persistence and application of knowledge which the students will gain, depends on, at all levels of education, their personal and professional development, social inclusion and readiness to become active citizens.

North Macedonia

North Macedonia 2021 Report²⁰ confirmed the priorities from the previous year, as the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the education system and progress of education reforms, as the efforts of the government were primarily focused on creating a distance-learning environment. In 2022, North Macedonia should in particular:

- implement the strategic framework for education and particularly the targets for preschool education and the Vocational Education and Training (VET) reform;
- improve support for teachers' training and professional development and ensure that an effective assessment process is in place;

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/6d7f693f-fd43-4869-80a5-09cba4f2e87a>

²⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/north-macedonia-report-2021_en

- improve access to quality education for all, in particular children with disabilities and children from Roma communities, and increase pre-school enrolment.

Draft Economic Reform Programme 2022 - 2024²¹ envisages further development of the qualification system which includes continuing cooperation between higher education institutions and the private schools, as well as secondary vocational schools and the private sector in order to ensure practical work for students in companies; validation of non-formal education – recognition of previous learning, and development of qualifications at level 5 and the opportunity for self-employment in craft activities, as well as establishment of a new financing model for primary and secondary education (block granting formula based on standardized input parameters).

²¹ <https://finance.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Draft-Chapter-5.ERP-2022-2024-public-consultation-1.pdf>

Overall national education strategy and key objectives

In January 2018 the Government of the Republic of Macedonia has adopted the new Strategy for Education for the period 2018-2025 and corresponding Action Plan, and consequently it was published by the Ministry of Education and Science in Macedonian, Albanian and English language. The process of adoption has been preceded by public debates and analysis of the content of the document by experts, national and international, stakeholders and working groups.

The new Strategy for Education and its Action Plan encompass all fields and levels of education. The vision of the Strategy itself is that the education is key for the strengthening of the national economy and the wellbeing of the Macedonian citizens and therefore it is essential to put efforts for development of inclusive and integrated education system which is “student-centered”, which implements modern programmes that will enable the future generations to acquire knowledge, skills and competencies compliant to the needs of the democratic multicultural society, labor market and for the new challenges of the global scientific and technological setting.

Education strategy 2018-2025

According to this vision, the Strategy will be mainly targeted to the improvement of:

- Quality of education and its relevance to North Macedonia’s society development priorities (particularly in terms of having productive and engaged citizens) and the needs of the labour markets, guided towards the expected learning outcomes, as well as acceptance of multiculturalism, interethnic integration, respect for diversity and democratic values;
- Development of generic and core competencies of pupils (and all learners), in order for them to develop into critical thinkers, active and relevant participants in social life;
- Education system infrastructure, including building facilities, equipment and teaching and supportive technologies in order to ensure appropriate learning environment in general and inclusion of persons with special education needs in particular;
- Capacities of human resources including managers, teaching and support staff;
- Quality and results of the educational process by means of improving the assessment/evaluation at all education levels: pupil, teacher, school and system;
- Autonomy of institutions in education, particularly of universities, as well as autonomy of entities in the education process;
- Legislation, Management and Funding.

Serbia

European Commission's Country report Serbia 2021²² states recommendations in the area of education:

- increase participation in early childhood education and care, in particular of children from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- consolidate the NQF system, with additional focus on the quality and scope of non-formal education; ensure full compliance of the policy and institutional framework for quality assurance in higher education with the recommendations of the European Association for Quality Assurance

The European Commission assessment of the ERP for Serbia identifies *Increasing employment, in particular of young people and women, and social protection against poverty* as one of the key challenges.

In addition, the Economic Reform Programme 2021 – 2023²³ identifies the following priorities:

- Qualifications oriented to the needs of the labour market: Continuation of the reform of secondary vocational education by improving the model of dual education through the establishment and implementation of a framework for monitoring and evaluation of dual educational profiles, which enables data-based decision making and ensures the quality of dual education, as well as infrastructure and training centres. As one of the answers to the new epidemiological situation, an online database will be created, which will contain teaching units that are implemented in educational institutions and topics for learning through work in companies. In terms of the implementation of the NOKS system, it is planned to pilot the procedure of recognition of prior learning, as well as to enter data into the NOKS Register.
- Digitalization of the education system and introduction of a uniform information education system - the reform implies the introduction of the Unified Information Education System, as an IT basis for the modernization of management and decision-making, which will contribute to the modernization and digitalization of the education system. It is also planned to develop a repository of open educational resources (didactic materials), as a database of digital resources for schools.

²² https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/serbia-report-2021_en

²³ <https://rsjp.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/Economic-Reform-Programme-2021-2023.pdf>

Annex 2. Activity plan 2022

| CORE ERI SEE Activities | Timeline 2022 |
|--|---------------|
| ERI SEE Governing Board Meeting | February |
| Meeting of the RCC – ERI SEE-RCC Joint Working Group on Recognition of Academic Qualifications | March |
| Meeting of Teacher education and training network (SEE TET) | April/May |
| Meeting of the RCC – ERI SEE Workgroup on the recognition of academic qualifications | May |
| Meeting of the RCC – ERI SEE Workgroup on the recognition of academic qualifications | June |
| Higher education study visit to Croatia | July |
| Peer learning higher education activity with Croatia | September |
| Regional SEE meeting of the ENIC NARIC network | September |
| International Conference on QA in higher education | October |
| Meeting of the RCC – ERI SEE Workgroup on the recognition of academic qualifications | October |
| ERI SEE Governing Board meeting | November |
| Meeting of SEE TET network | November |
| Meeting of the RCC – ERI SEE Workgroup on the recognition of academic qualifications | December |
| Newsletter | December |

| Project activities EQET SEE | Timeline 2022 |
|--|---------------------|
| Kick off meeting | February |
| Project management meeting | February |
| National meetings for Occupational standard 1 | February/March |
| Regional meetings for Occupational standard 1 | April |
| QA Policy vision conference | March/April |
| QA Data management training | May |
| Regional meetings for external evaluators' standards | May/June |
| National meetings for external evaluators' standards | July/August |
| National meetings for the Occupational standard 2 | June 2022 |
| Regional meetings for the Occupational standard 2 | July 2022 |
| Regional meetings for Qualification standard 1 | July/September |
| National meetings for Qualification standard 1 | September |
| Regional meeting for regional methodologies/EE frameworks | October – December |
| Development of guidelines/recommendations for regional methodologies | November - December |
| Regional meetings for Qualification standard 2 | December |

ⁱ Work Programme for 2022 – 2023 was developed on the basis of consultations with the Governing Board members and Consultative Body members, as well as consultations with the relevant strategic documents

**This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.*