



EDUCATION REFORM INITIATIVE OF SOUTH
EASTERN EUROPE
(ERI SEE)
WORK PROGRAMME
2024

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ERI SEE WORK PROGRAMME 2024

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I. INTRODUCTION

I.1. About Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe

The Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe is an international organization, established by the ministries in charge of education from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Republic of Moldova, Republic of North Macedonia and Serbia. Its mandate is to enhance regional cooperation in education and training in the SEE region and Republic of Moldova (through various activities - joint projects, peer exchanges, trainings, workshops, conferences etc.) to support national reforms and foster European trends and developments. The joint vision agreed among the ERI SEE member countries implies that ERI SEE acts both at the implementation and coordination level i.e. as the project implementing institution and body coordinating various regional activities, but at the same time continuing the policy dialogue and facilitating policy exchanges, thus being a valuable asset contributing to the stability and progress in the region.

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;

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

- 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 its 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, functioning in Zagreb under the Croatian jurisdiction and within the Croatian legislative system, was transferred to Serbia where the new Secretariat for Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe started being developed, in the form of an international organisation, initially 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 ERI SEE member countries (in the period from 2013 to 2015), the ratification procedure was completed in December 2017. This in turn meant that the Host-Country Agreement entered into force, that the Secretariat got the official legal status of an international organization and diplomatic mission and that the Government of the Host Country ensured its support and conditions necessary for effective performance. The legal status in turn opened new opportunities for ERI SEE Secretariat, among which the most important being entering into contractual relationships with donors, which enabled expanding activities and reach.

I.2. Short overview of the activities implemented in 2023

In 2023 ERI SEE was implementing the project Enhancements of the Quality in Education and Training in South Eastern Europe – EQET SEE, funded by the Austrian Development Agency; initiated the new project, Renewable Energy Services in Education and Training – RESET, funded by the German Development Cooperation; and implemented its regular activities.

2023 was the second year of the implementation of the regional project named Enhancements in the Quality of Education and Training in South Eastern Europe – EQET SEE, funded by the Austrian Development Cooperation through Austrian Development Agency, divided into two main pillars:

1. Covering the area of Quality Assurance in pre-tertiary education (including both general education and VET)
2. Covering the area of modernization of VET and building connections with the business sector.

The project is of 36-month duration, with the expected 6-month extension. It started in October 2021 and expecting to finish in March 2025. The budget of the project is approximately 2 mill EUR of which around 90% comes from the Austrian Development Agency and around 10 % from ERI SEE. In 2023, the 650.000,00 EUR of the agreed budget was transferred to the ERI SEE account.

The project is implemented in close cooperation with the main partners from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, Republic of Moldova, Republic of North Macedonia and Serbia:

- Agencies in charge of quality assurance in pre-tertiary education, gathered under the Regional network of experts in quality assurance in pre-tertiary education and coordinated by the ERI SEE
- Agencies in charge of VET, gathered under the South Eastern Europe VET Network (SEE VET Net) and coordinated by the ERI SEE
- Agencies in charge of qualifications

- Chambers of Commerce, which, together with the SEE VET Net, form the Western Balkans Alliance for Work-based Learning and are coordinated by the ERI SEE and Western Balkans 6 Chambers Investment Forum (WB6 CIF)
- Ministries in charge of education
- Ministries in charge of labour and economy, where applicable.

The project is 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. In the area of VET modernization and cooperation with the business sector, the results include the regionally-based occupational and qualification standards for agricultural technician of traditional and organic productions and locksmith, which have been also adapted to national circumstances and have entered or are in the process of entering national systems. Curricula based on regional occupational and qualification standards also started being developed in 2023. In addition, the first set of regional teaching and learning material was developed in 2023: materials for students and teachers in the sector of agriculture, accompanying work-based learning guidelines, general introduction into social and gender themes and social and gender aspects of agricultural technician profile and specific recommendations for teachers regarding social, gender and environmental themes in agriculture. In the area of quality assurance, the training needs analysis at regional level was performed, using the regional questionnaire for the identification of training needs. The results were used to shape the first draft of the training programme for external evaluators at regional level. Also, in 2023, the publication on good practices in the implementation of the external evaluation methodologies was prepared, compiling around 75 practices from 20 different institutions from European Union and ERI SEE economies in charge of external evaluation.

In 2023, ERI SEE started a project funded by the German Development Cooperation, GIZ, on the subject of renewable energy and education and training, called Renewable Energy Services in Education and Training – RESET, with the budget of around 190.000,00 EUR and duration of 24 months. The project will focus on increasing visibility and raising awareness of the renewable energy in the Western Balkans, and on developing recommendations and action plan for the region on the learning content for renewable energy.

Regarding the teacher education and training thematic priority, ERI SEE has been coordinating the South Eastern Teacher Education and Training (SEE TET) Network as of 2018. In 2023 permanent members of the SEE TET Network were appointed by their respective institutions, and for them ERI SEE organized a study visit to Zagreb with the help of the Croatian Academic and Research Network (CARNET). The study visit focused on digital approaches to teaching and learning implemented by CARNET, and offered a visit to a rural primary school that acts as a regional centre for digitalization in technology.

In the area of higher education, a Ministerial conference focusing on quality and quality assurance in higher education was organized in September 2023, with the support of the North Macedonian Ministry of Education and Science, and participation of Minister of education of Montenegro, Vice Minister of

education of Lithuania and Assistant Minister of Education of Serbia, ENQA and EQAR directors, directors of quality assurance institutions, representatives of higher education institutions and many more. An additional peer visit to Croatian Agency for Science and Higher education was also organized. The discussions revolved around the integration of the agreed European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) into the systems of Western Balkans quality assurance.

I.3. Internal organization

ERI SEE Secretariat team is composed of 3 full-time employees (3 FTEs) and 0.3 financial manager. The team coordinates the work at regional level that includes more than 30 different national institutions in 4 thematic areas: Modernization of VET and cooperation with the business sector, Quality assurance in pre-tertiary education, Quality assurance in tertiary education, and Teacher Education and Training.

The ERI SEE Secretariat team is composed of 3 full-time employees (3 FTEs) and 0.3 financial manager. The team coordinates the work at regional level that includes more than 30 different national institutions. Through ERI SEE coordination, the representatives of these institutions are gathered together to produce and contribute to various regional outputs that are later on integrated into national systems. The 2023 also saw the changes in the composition of the team in the position of the Sector Project Coordinator in charge of the QA aspect of the EQET SEE project.

The strategic management structure – the ERI SEE Governing Board, is composed of representatives of ministries of education from ERI SEE participating countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Republic of Moldova, Republic of North Macedonia and Serbia), and partner institutions OeAD and RCC.

II STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

ERI SEE is strategically managed by the ERI SEE Governing Board, the strategic decisions of which correspond to the strategic directions of the ERI SEE members, identified through the Economic Reform Programmes, European Commission country reports and Common Regional Market as a part of the Berling Process. Thematic orientation of ERI SEE, based on the strategic analysis, is focusing on 4 thematic areas: Modernization of VET and cooperation with the business sector, Quality assurance in pre-tertiary education, Quality assurance in tertiary education, and Teacher Education and Training.

II.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, offers a solid analysis of needed actions which are further on reflected in national strategic documents. 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) among themselves and with the 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 (CRM). 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 quality assurance systems and qualifications, relevant as the source of the highly qualified labour marked force in the region and their easier circulation within the region.

For the purpose of the ERI SEE Work Programme for 2024, the Economic Reform Programmes of ERI SEE Member states have been consulted, together with the European Commission 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.

II.2. ERI SEE Governing Board

ERI SEE Governing Board is the strategic body composed of the representatives of the ministries in charge of education from ERI SEE Member Countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Republic of Moldova, Republic of North Macedonia and Serbia). It meets twice a year – to adopt the main documents governing the operations of the ERI SEE Secretariat, and to be briefed about the status of implementation through the year. It is in charge of steering the direction of the ERI SEE initiative and Secretariat.

ERI SEE Governing Board is in charge of governing the direction in which ERI SEE and ERI SEE Secretariat is going. It is also 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 both the implementation framework for regional cooperation in the area of education and training, as well as providing strong platform for policy dialogue, facilitating policy exchanges thus being a valuable asset contributing to the stability in the region.

Thus, 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 Governing Board also includes representatives of Austrian Agency for Education and Internationalization (OeAD), and Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and is joined by the Consultative Body, composed of representatives of the European Training Foundation (ETF) and Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, coordinating the implementation of the Danube Strategy in its Priority Area 9: Human Capital Development.

The meetings of the Governing Board and Consultative Bodies are held minimum 2 times a year and are used for strategic discussions and decisions, as well as content consultations and inputs for the

development of the Work Programme and Financial Plan. In 2024, 2 governing meetings of the ERI SEE Governing Board meeting are planned, with continuous communication and consultations in between these meetings. The first Governing Board meeting is usually organized in the first two months of the year, with the main topic being adoption of the reports from the previous year – Activity Report with information about how the activities planned within the Work Programme were implemented, and Financial Report, reflecting the financial status of the budget. During the first Governing Board meeting, the members are presented with the audit report, auditing in detail the activities and financial statement of the ERI SEE Secretariat in the previous year.

Also, the first meeting of the year will be dedicated to the discussion and adoption of the most relevant documents guiding the work of the ERI SEE Secretariat throughout the year - Work Programme for the current year and the corresponding Financial Plan. The Governing Board will meet again in the last quarter of the year, to be briefed by the ERI SEE Secretariat about the status in the implementation of the Work Programme and Financial Plan for the current year. On this occasion, the Governing Board also will discuss the activities planned for the upcoming year and corresponding finances, proposed by the ERI SEE Secretariat. The communication with the Governing Board throughout the year will be continuous and is maintained via e-mail.

The Consultative Body will be present at all the meetings of the Governing Board and provides its expert opinions and suggestions, thus influencing the quality of work of the ERI SEE Secretariat, as well as the official documents guiding the work of the ERI SEE – Work Programme and Financial Plan.

II.3. Cooperation with international partner organizations

In 2024 ERI SEE plans to continue cooperation with its most 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). The cooperation with German Development Cooperation (GIZ), established in 2023, is planned to continue and expand in 2024. In 2024 ERI SEE also plans to maintain its position as a member of the Steering Committee of the Danube Strategy Priority Area 9: People and Skills. Cooperation with European bodies in charge of quality assurance in higher education – ENQA and EQAR is planned to be continued.

ERI SEE much values its connections and cooperation with international partners and in international community. 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 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 continuing through the work of the Joint ERI SEE – RCC Working Group for Recognition of Academic Qualifications and Quality Assurance.

The Memorandum of understanding 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., is on-going and is reflected in the implementation of the regional project Enhancements of quality in education and training in South Eastern Europe (EQET SEE) and active participation of the WB6 CIF members.

ERI SEE also plans to continue its active participation in the Steering Group meetings for the European Union Strategy for Danube Region (EUSDR) – Priority Area 9 People and Skills. Participation in these meetings gives ERI SEE a greater visibility in the region and opens up possibilities for further partnering activities.

Cooperation with German Development Cooperation (GIZ) is planned to continue in 2024 through the implementation of the one component of the regional, SEE project: Green Agenda: Decarbonization of the energy sector in the Western Balkans, managed by GIZ. ERI SEE is contracted for the implementation of a component of this project that focuses on connecting energy sector to education and training, titled Renewable Energy Services in Education and Training (RESET). The cooperation is planned in the form of regional activities joining energy sector and education and training representatives, coordinating activities with GIZ and other project components, regular management meetings and joint events.

The exchange of information between ERI SEE and other GIZ-funded projects in the region is also planned to be continued, as well as with other international bodies, such as Austrian Development Cooperation and Swiss Development Cooperation, exploring possibilities of formalizing this cooperation and achieving sharing information and project results.

II.4. Internal organization and visibility

ERI SEE staff in 2024 will include Director (1 FTE), Regional Project Coordinator (1 FTE), Sector Project Coordinator (1 FTE), and Financial Manager (0,3 FTE). They are employed for the implementation of regular and project ERI SEE activities.

Visibility is achieved through organization of regional activities, participation at regional and international events, newsletter and specific websites dedicated to ERI SEE themes and areas.

In 2023 ERI SEE Secretariat will, in its day-to-day activities, rely on the 3.3 FTEs. The Secretariat will coordinate networks relevant for thematic priorities, which includes regular communication, meetings, and coordination with more than 30 institutions from the region. Some expert activities resulting in expert intellectual products, such as Instructions for teachers on cross cutting issues within the EQET SEE project, teaching and learning material and trainings, legal advising etc. are planned to be sub-contracted externally, following the internal ERI SEE rules specified by the Internal Rules and Regulations adopted by the ERI SEE Governing Board. Additionally, the scope of work of the ERI SEE Secretariat will expand to additional 1 FTE for the implementation of the GIZ project component Renewable Energy Services in Education and Training, which will be divided internally among the existing ERI SEE staff, according to the project proposal and in agreement with the Governing Board.

The focus of internal organisation will be on internal quality management, which includes always having the minimum of 4-eye principle and clear segregation of duties between preparing and approving document and payments. The principle of transparency, sharing of information and documents, and synchronization of internal practices and procedures is always applied. The internal quality management is also externally verified by frequent audits. In 2024, one annual audit for the regular ERI SEE activities, and 1 for the Enhancements in the Quality of Education and Training in South Eastern Europe (EQET SEE) project, are planned. The results of the audit are shared with the ERI SEE Governing Board and donors.

The visibility of the ERI SEE has greatly increased in the previous years, which was contributed to by frequent presence of the ERI SEE in national activities, partnerships with national actors and numerous regional activities organized with and for the national partners. The visibility as such is not a means to its own end, but a result of the reliable cooperation, constant communication, and production of results

that are needed and welcome by national partners. With new activities planned for 2024, ERI SEE visibility is planned to increase even further. This will be achieved by organization of trainings for teachers, company mentors and coordinators for work-based learning in the sectors of agriculture and metal processing, by which ERI SEE will be recognized among the education providers. Similarly, as trainings for external evaluators are planned, the visibility will be enhanced in the area of quality assurance as well. Last but not least, through cooperation with the GIZ on a new project, in the area which is new to ERI SEE, and crucial for the region – Green agenda and renewable energy – the visibility will be enhanced in a completely new sector - energy sector with beneficiaries in both business and education and training sectors.

All these activities will contribute to the ERI SEE presence and visibility, and will also be documented in the dedicated ERI SEE websites: sustainability and continuity, and on the further increase in the visibility of ERI SEE:

- regular ERI SEE site (www.erisee.org) , which acts as a main source of information for all the activities, in all aspects and sectors.
- EQET SEE project site (www.eqet.erisee.org), for the activities related to the EQET SEE project implementation and publication of project results
- WBA4WBL site (www.wba4wbl.com) , for the developments in the work-based learning in the region, as well as an archive to the previous regional project – Towards Regionally Based Occupational Standards (TO REGOS)
- WB qualifications site, dedicated to the recognition of qualifications and quality assurance (www.wb-qualifications.org), to serve as the portal about processes and procedures in the recognition of higher education qualifications and register of accredited institutions and/or study programmes.

Additionally, news and results of the RESET project, will be also published on the GIZ project site for Green Agenda for the Western Balkans: Decarbonization of the Energy Sector (<https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/125913.html>).

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.

III 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 2024 will remain consistent and focus on:

1. General education and supporting quality assurance systems and improvements in teacher education and training.
 2. Vocational education and training and increasing employability through contributing to cooperation between education and business sector, including work in the sector of renewable energy as a part of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans.
 3. Higher education and supporting quality assurance systems and facilitating recognition of academic recognition.
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ERI SEE has been focusing its work on the areas of interest that are shared among its member countries, thus ensuring the relevance of its activities for all the participating members.

In general education, the activities regarding quality and quality assurance will continue to include trainings for external evaluators on their competences and guidelines for internal quality assurance mechanisms of quality assurance agencies. Teachers' Education and Training will also be in focus, through further work of the South Eastern European Teachers' Education and Training Network (SEE TET).

So far, the focus has also strongly been placed on vocational education and training, and more particularly, its modernization and cooperation with the business sector. Here, ERI SEE has addressed the identified needs through strong cooperation with VET agencies and Chambers of commerce and joint development of regionally based occupation qualification standards and regional teaching and learning material with guidelines for work-based learning and environmental, social and gender aspects.

The work in 2024 will expand to include further teaching and learning material development and trainings for teachers, company instructors and school coordinators. These activities will be implemented in cooperation with the South Eastern European Vocational Education and Training Network (SEE VET Net) and Western Balkans Alliance for Work Based Learning (WBA4WBL).

Also, a new priority sector has been identified within the VET sector, connected to the Green Agenda in the Western Balkans and more particularly, the renewable energy sector. In 2024 ERI SEE will start its first promotional and awareness raising activities in this particular sector, together with the dialogue between education and training and business sector on learning content for renewable energy, and recommendations for further cooperation. This can also result in the increase of activities in the sector of adult education, which provides education and training services for upskilling and re-skilling in the energy sector.

In the area of higher education, ERI SEE will further support the Quality Assurance agencies in their path to becoming members of and registered in the most relevant European Quality Assurance bodies – European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA) and European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), by organizing capacity building activities.

III.1. General Education

In this thematic area, ERI SEE will cover two topics: Quality assurance in pre-tertiary education, through the EQET SEE project, and Teacher Education and Training, through regular activities and cooperation with ETF and OeAD. The work of 2 regional networks: Regional group of experts in QA in pre-tertiary education, and South Eastern European Teacher Education and Training Network (SEE TET), active in this thematic area, will be continued.

The activities in the thematic area of general education, planned for 2024, will, as in previous years, be 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 citizens. 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: Regional group of experts in QA in pre-tertiary education are composed of the representatives of agencies for quality assurance for general education and VET; and SEE TET Network

is composed of the representatives of Teacher Training agencies and Ministries, dealing with teacher trainings.

In 2024, in the area of QA, the activities will be implemented within the scope of the regional project Enhancements in the Quality of Education and Training in South Eastern Europe – EQET SEE; and in the area of Teacher education and training, out of the regular ERI SEE activities and in cooperation with the European Training Foundation (ETF) and Austrian Agency for Education and Internationalization (OeAD).

III.1.1. Quality Assurance in Pre-tertiary Education

In 2024, the activities in the area of Quality Assurance in pre-tertiary education at regional level will include the design of the training programme for external evaluators, and its implementation, and at national levels the national implementation of the training needs analysis and national implementation of trainings for external evaluators. It will also include publication of the good European practices in the implementation of external evaluation methodologies and their integration into national processes, and development of Guidelines for Internal Quality Assurance for Quality Assurance Agencies.

As mentioned earlier, increasing the quality of education, as a pre-requisite for 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*, Montenegro, Republic of Moldova, Republic of North Macedonia and Serbia have all, among other actions, established dedicated 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 rationale for the intervention in the QA aspects lies in the current over-administration and lack of partnership approach in the external evaluation processes. The focus on quality improvements should be enhanced (rather than on formal or administrative aspects), communication between policy-makers, policy-implementors and schools should be encouraged and greater investment into internal quality systems of the QA bodies implementing the external evaluation should be made.

To tackle the above, 2024 will see the continuation of the Enhancements in the Quality of Education and Training in South Eastern Europe (EQET SEE) project, funded by the Austrian Development Agency through funds of Austrian Development Cooperation. The project is contributing to closer connection and exchanges among the QA Agencies, and relevant regional outputs.

The partners in the process are agencies in charge of quality assurance and external evaluation of schools from the region, and the European Training Foundation (ETF) and Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI).

Joint regional work in this area already resulted in a policy vision calling for a more formative, or supportive approach to external evaluation, and a more cooperative approach between decision makers, policy implementers and practitioners. The aspect of data and competence building was given a high priority. The regional standard of competences of external evaluators was agreed, on the basis of which the Training Needs Analysis Questionnaire was developed and implemented, with identified needs at regional level. The exchange on the good practices in external evaluation phases started in 2023 and will be finalized in 2024.

In 2024 the work will be continued and include:

- Finalization and publication of the Good European Practices in the implementation of external evaluation methodologies, consisting of more than 75 examples of good practices and tools from more than 20 institutions from the region and European Union. The publication will serve as a source of inspiration and knowledge for further improvements of the Quality Assurance Agencies from the region.
- National meetings for the identification and selection of good practices to be integrated into national systems in the South Eastern European region and Republic of Moldova.
- Development of the training programme for external evaluators at regional level, based on the results of the regionally implemented Training Needs Analysis questionnaire
- Implementation of the training programme at regional level
- National implementation of the training programme
- Development of Internal Quality Assurance Guidelines for Quality Assurance Agencies

In 2024, the work of the QA agencies will focus on the integration of regionally developed products and building competences of external evaluators.

Cooperation with the European Training Foundation (ETF) and Standing International Conference of Inspectorates, the European association of inspectorates or quality agencies will continue on the subjects of quality assurance.

The potential challenges in the implementation of the above activities in 2024 may include:

- Heavy workload of partner institutions, fueled by the shortage of staff at national level, influencing the availability for regional activities
- Impossibility to integrate regional products into national practices due to strict national regulations and legislation

To mitigate this risk, constant communication with project partners is held, trying to find suitable dates and periods for regional actions will be kept, and national meetings will be available for discussions with stakeholders, who were also a part of regional meetings, on future usage of regional products.

II.1.2. Teacher education and training

In the area of teacher education and training the activities of the SEE Teacher Education and Training Network (SEE TET 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, will be continued, though to a limited extent.

The work in the area of teacher education and training was established in 2018 by ERI SEE and ETF and has been coordinated ever since. As of 2021, the SEE TET Network is also supported by the OeAD – Austrian Agency for Education and Internationalisation. In 2023, the permanent members of the SEE TET Network have been appointed, showing continuous interest and support from member countries for the work of this network. The work in 2024 will build on the activities in 2023 and joint regional conclusions on what is relevant for economies:

- continuous teacher trainings, including in the digital form, for which quality criteria need to be established (both for the organization and content delivery, as well as for the impact of effect of those teacher training programmes.
- Continuing exploration of potentials of digital pedagogy, digital and blended teaching and learning and digital material
- Contributing to quality culture building

As the activities are funded through the regular budget of the ERI SEE, which is limited for this purpose, 1 regional event in the blended format is envisaged for 2024. Potential cooperation with other, EU-based institutions active in digital teaching and training activities, will be explored.

Risks include:

- a. Lack of financial resources, as this activity is not included in the project-funded activities of the ERI SE

As a mitigating measure, additional sources of funding will be looked for.

- b. Lack of formalization of the SEE TET Network (through a cooperation agreement of similar) and lack of regular funding available, which poses threats to the sustainability of the SEE TET Network

As a mitigating measure, the Cooperation agreement will be proposed, and alternative ways of working (on-line, or on the margins of some other events) will be explored.

III.2 Vocational education and training

In 2024, the activities in the area of Vocational Education and Training (VET) will focus on the development of teaching and learning material with guidelines for work-based learning for the profiles of locksmith. In addition, the training programme for teachers, company instructors and school coordinators for the 2 profiles of agricultural technician and locksmith, and the implementation of these trainings, will be implemented. The teaching and learning material, as well as trainings, will duly reflect the environmental, social and gender aspects. This is the first time that teaching and learning material, and trainings, are produced at regional level by representatives from 6 economies.

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 qualification standards and 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 Enhancements in the Quality of Education and Training in South Eastern Europe (EQET) SEE project, funded by the Austrian Development Agency through funds of Austrian Development Cooperation. The Western Balkans Alliance for Work-based learning is the implementing partner in the project at national level of individual economies.

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 is contributing 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, we are building strong cooperation mechanisms between private and public sector in VET, and enabling strong involvement of adequate business representatives in the definition of the skills needed on the labour market.

After successful completion of activities regarding development of occupational and qualification standards for agricultural technician in traditional and organic cultivation, and locksmith, and piloting of the development of teaching and learning material for agricultural technician in 2023, in 2024 the activities will be directed to the development of the teaching and learning material for the profile of locksmith. For the first time, regional material for learners, and accompanying handbooks for teachers, in the sector of metal processing, will be developed, together with guidelines for work-based learning, social, gender and environmental aspects. The process will be the following:

- Upon the appointment of national experts for teaching and learning material for the profile of locksmith, by the National Coordination Points, a smaller regional group of experts, consisting of 6 – 8 members, will be composed.
- This smaller regional group will be assigned to develop the teaching and learning material and guidelines for work-based learning, during the 3 - 4 regional meetings.
- The smaller regional group of experts needs to reach a consensus, during the first regional meeting, on the units of learning outcomes that should be covered through the regional teaching and learning material.
- The basis for the material are the learning outcomes defined through the regionally-based qualification standards for locksmith.
- The time in between the meetings will be used by the members of the smaller regional group as a preparatory period for drafting material and providing follow-up to the agreements made during the regional meetings.
- One member of the smaller regional group of experts is tasked to coordinate the process and edit the inputs received from other experts, ensuring the material is synchronized in style, volume, level of detail etc.
- Once the task is complete, the proposal of the material is shared with the National Coordination Points for their written feedback.
- Written feedback is used by the smaller regional working group to fine-tune their regional proposal of the teaching and learning material.
- The material is presented during a regional meeting where the members of the smaller working group, national coordination points and teaching and learning experts from the participating economies are present, discuss the material, finalize it and officially endorse it.
- After the regional endorsement, national meetings will be organized by the implementing partners – agencies for vocational education and training and chambers of economy, to adjust the regional material to national specificities.

The other set of activities will focus on the development of the trainings for teachers, company instructors and school coordinators for agricultural technician and locksmith. The basis for the trainings will be the produced teaching, learning, work-based learning and environmental, social and gender (ESG) material.

The development of trainings will follow the structure:

- Trainers will be selected by the ERI SEE, on the basis of the Open Call for experts
- They will propose the structure of the training, focusing on the relevant learning outcomes
- The training programme will be presented to the regional working group, discussed, finalized and endorsed.
- The training programme will be implemented at regional level, training the trainers for teachers, company instructors and school coordinators.
- The training programme will be implemented using face-to-face and on-line mode.
- After the implementation, trainers will organize further trainings in their economies.

In terms of the activities, the following will be organized in 2024 for the successful realization of outputs:

- Project management: 3 project management meetings for the agreements on the process, and timeline
- Regional teaching and learning material for agricultural technician: adjustment of the material at national level (2 national meetings per economy)
- Regional training programme for agricultural technician: regional meeting for the endorsement of the regional training programme
- Regional implementation of the training programme for agricultural technician: regional meetings for teachers, company instructors and school coordinators (6 meetings face-to-face and on-line)
- National implementation of training programme for agricultural technician
- Regional teaching and learning material for locksmith: 5 regional meetings for development and endorsement
- Regional teaching and learning material for locksmith: adjustment of the material at national level (2 national meetings per economy)
- Regional training programme for locksmith: regional meeting for the endorsement of the regional training programme
- Regional implementation of the training programme for locksmith: regional meetings for teachers, company instructors and school coordinators (6 meetings face-to-face and on-line)
- National implementation of training programme for locksmith

Potential risks include the complexity of processes that are done for the first time in the South Eastern European region, and possibly first time ever, in cooperation with different actors from different economies, with different practices and systems of trainings and materials. As a consequence, reaching a consensus on certain aspects may take more time than planned, which then, as a result, may prolong the processes and require additional funding for additional working meetings. This will be discussed with the donor and in this case, budget reallocations will be requested.

III.3. Higher Education and its Quality Assurance

Quality of higher education in the region is in the focus of the ERI SEE activities. In partnership with the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), activities regarding the Quality Assurance (QA) of Higher Education and assistance to the Western Balkans economies in their application of European Standards and guidelines, in the form of a study visit for QA agency representatives, will be organized.

The activities in the area of higher education will be funded by the regular budget of the ERI SEE Secretariat and as such are limited in its scope and impact. However, they will be relevant to the region and regional partners – Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education.

During the international conference on quality and quality assurance in higher education, held in September 2023, organized with the support of North Macedonian Ministry of Education and Science, and with participation of most relevant European bodies in this area – European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA) and European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), participants from the Western Balkans 6 and the Republic of Moldova agreed on a set of conclusions, that among others identified the need to increase cooperation between the Western Balkans and European bodies in charge of Quality Assurance.

As a result, ERI SEE is planning, in cooperation with ENQA, a study visit to Scotland, to the UK Quality Assurance Agency Scotland, which will share its good practices with the participants from the region.

In addition, the activities regarding the Joint Information System (JIS) and update of the Quality Assurance Register will be organized – update of the information and training on the maintenance of data.

Possible risks may include difficulties in visa procedures needed for the Study visit to Scotland, which may result in some participants not being able to join, or the Study visit to be postponed. Additional risk is the limitation in funds available, which may have an impact on the support provided to the participants (logistical) during the Study visit.

III.4. Green Agenda for the Western Balkans

In 2024, ERI SEE will be the project leader for the the activities of the regional project Renewable Energy Services in Education and Training (RESET), a part of a larger regional project Green Agenda: Decarbonization of the Energy Sector in the Western Balkans, implemented by German Development Cooperation (GIZ). The project's goal is to raise awareness in the education and training sector about the changing demands in the education and training sector caused by the growth of the renewable energy sector, and develop recommendations on the steps needed to be taken.

The European Green Deal and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, through the Sofia Declaration and the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans 2021 – 2030 (endorsed by the Western Balkans leaders at the summit held in Slovenia, Brdo, on 6th of October 2021), set the energy transition process, environmental protection and climate change as the priorities for the Western Balkan countries.

To join other European countries in striving for climate neutral continent by 2050, the whole region needs to actively engage in the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. In comparison with the EU countries, where the CO₂ emissions per capita are on the level of the EU average, CO₂ emissions are still several times higher than the EU average. Currently, the two thirds of the CO₂ emissions balance is coming from the energy sector of which 60% from the coalfired power generations, which highlights the importance and urgency of decarbonization of the energy sector.

And while a certain level of preparation for decarbonization has been achieved in some economies, considerable strengthening of technical and administrative capacities at all levels and further investments directed towards the transition to renewable energies are needed. With public incentives systems still underdeveloped, frequent mixed messages from policy makers related to the energy transition reduce planning certainty of investors in renewables. Also, green electricity trading in the Western Balkans region is still limited. Further on, the stakeholders (regulators and grid operators) are still insufficiently familiar with methodological and technological solutions for supply-safe grid integrations of high proportions of renewable energy.

To respond to the increasing demand by the key actors in the electricity sector for technological, regulatory and HR solutions for the implementation of an environmentally and climate-friendly energy transition, the German Development Cooperation (GIZ) has designed a project “Green Agenda: Decarbonization of the Electricity Sector in the Western Balkans” that foresees the threefold action related to 1. renewable energy grid integration, 2. renewable energy regulatory framework, and 3. promoting TVET and education for renewable energy services.

In 2024, ERI SEE will be particularly involved in the above-mentioned component 3, as the project leader for the the activities from 1st October 2023 till 31st September 2025. The project is of regional character, with goal to prepare the adequate response from the education and training sector to the changing demands on the labour market caused by growth of the renewable energy sector.

The overall objective of this project is to support the developments of the adequate response from the education and training sector to the introduction of the renewable energy professions into the Western Balkans. The project consists of 2 packages:

1. Development of recommendations to TVET decision makers to accelerate the Labour market and energy developments for Renewable energy.

These recommendations should take into consideration the good practices existing in more advance economies, and should be adjusted to specific Western Balkans circumstances, including educational legal framework and regulations. They should also be supported by the analysis of the effects of the increased Renewable Energy sector demand on education and labour market, taking into consideration both labour market needs and current and future education provision.

The recommendations should include the framework of regionally uniform learning content and reference to the technical equipment needed for training needed by continuing education institutions for Renewable Energy.

The actions that should be taken are:

- regional conference for the presentation of the conclusions of the LM and ET studies (The conclusions of the LM and ET studies broadly presented to the relevant actors in the WB6 (policy makers and stakeholders), promoting policy discussions

- Preparation of the material for the learning content for 2 selected profession in the Renewable energy sector, based on the labour market analysis
 - Regional meeting for the recommendations and adjustment of regionally uniform learning content/framework
 - Regional meeting for the development of action plan for the further developments in the Labour Market and Education and Training sector targeting renewable energy
2. Raising awareness and promoting TVET for Renewable Energy Services

The awareness-raising and promotion campaign should increase the level of general understanding of the energy shift in the Western Balkans, as well as the level of specific understanding among policy makers, policy implementers and stakeholders. It should aim at creating a positive climate towards the RE transition and inform about the future potentials and opportunities that RE transition brings to the education, labour force and labour market.

The information and awareness raising campaign shall conceptualize the information and promotional, gender-sensitive activities to the benefits of energy sector and vocational training sector of WB countries to facilitate their implementation of employment and labour market measures among the upcoming energy transition. It shall also include on-site advisory to project partners, in particular TVET organization, on campaigning and advocacy to train and recruit more interested people for energy professions.

The activities that will be taken include:

- online regional conference on the relevance of RE and its impact on ET and business, promoting RE occupations, qualifications and career prospects and joint regional actions
- 6 National events face-to-face by the national education agencies
- 6 online National events by the national education agencies
- PR: National and regional press work on all fields of action

To accommodate for the newly developing needs of the labour market, namely the needs of the renewable energy sector, the new skills and qualifications on the labour market will be needed at all levels. This asks for a greater cooperation and communication between the business sector coming from the renewable energy field on the one hand, and education and training on the other. In 2024, significant efforts will be taken to increase understanding and awareness about the relevance of the transition to the renewable energies among the education stakeholders; to understand effects it will have on the education and training sector as well as promote benefits this transition can bring to the future qualifications and employment.

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 2024 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 European Commission recommendation within the Country Report Albania 2023³, within the Chapter 26 Education and Culture, states:

Albania is moderately prepared in the field of education and culture. Some progress was made, with further strengthening the new National Agency for Employment and Skills, and the continued restructuring of the National Agency for Education, Vocational Training and Qualifications.

The new 2023-2030 national strategy on employment and skills and the new 2022-2029 national youth strategy place an emphasis on improving the quality of Vocational Education and Training (VET) and increasing the skills of young people. Further efforts are required to strengthen the quality and inclusiveness of education, while appropriate resources should be allocated to ensure that the new policy reforms are implemented.

Some of last year's recommendations were not fully addressed and remain valid. In the coming year, Albania should in particular:

- ensure sufficient resources for the optimisation of the VET system in line with the needs of the labour market;
- improve the professional development and training of teachers and trainers, with a focus on pedagogical skills related to the implementation of the competence-based inclusive approach and digitalisation from pre-primary to university level, including VET education.

² <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/>

³ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_690%20Albania%20report.pdf

The European Commission assessment of the ERP for Albania⁴ identifies *Increasing innovation and skills of young people and adults to enhance employment* as one of the key challenges. Also, there is a need to increase funding and capacity for skills and training, social protection, and healthcare to improve employability and social inclusion. Participation in vocational education and training (VET) is growing but level remains relatively low compared to its regional peers and economic demand – only 17.7% of upper secondary students enrolled in VET schools in 2021. Skill mismatches and quality issues in education and vocational training persist, as schools have yet to develop curricula that attractive for students or that are relevant to the needs of the labour market. The fact that few adults participate in lifelong learning hinders the matching of skills supply and demand. Even growing sectors such as ICT struggle to recruit staff, so providing digital skills training and promoting work-based learning in the digital sector could yield substantial benefits.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023 Report⁵, European Commission working document, states that Bosnia and Herzegovina is „at an early stage of preparation in the area of education and culture. There was no progress in the area. A fully functional system of accreditation of higher education institutions and in particular study programmes is still lacking. Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to align legislation at all levels of government with the framework laws on education, and ensure application of the common core curriculum based on learning outcomes. Social inclusion at all stages of education needs to be ensured. Youth strategies across the country should be developed and implemented.

Having only been partly addressed, the recommendations of last year’s report remain relevant. In the coming year, Bosnia and Herzegovina should in particular:

- extend and update the action plan for the national qualification framework (NQF) and establish an inter-sectoral commission for NQF;
- 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 and the implementation of findings to improve PISA results

The European Commission Assessment of the Economic Reform Programme for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023 – 2025⁶ 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

⁴ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/94fba65c-6c50-4b56-8e4d-3f75947286f1_en?filename=Albania%202023%20ERP%20assessment%20SWD_2023_105.pdf

⁵ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/bosnia-and-herzegovina-report-2023_en

⁶ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/2ded8477-b301-48fe-ac4a-689681048108_en?filename=Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina%202023%20ERP%20assessment%20SWD_2023_110.pdf

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. Among the problems highlighted by a plethora of reports are: weak coordination mechanisms at all levels of the country, a mismatch of education curricula and a gender gap.

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 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.

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.

Last but not least, in 2022 the consultations about transforming education were undertaken across the relevant policy-making bodies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which resulted in the adoption of the Statement of Commitment to Transform Education supported by Line Education Ministries in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to define the paths of transformation of education and to provide quality, inclusive and accessible education to all children and youth in BiH.

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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>

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

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

Croatia

In July 2021 the Government of the Republic of Croatia adopted the National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021-2026. 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.

As of 2024 the regular registration and storage of digital diplomas in the Central evidence of certificates, diplomas and diploma supplements (Digital Diploma Register) has commenced. The Evidence of persons applied for enrolment in higher education institutions as well as the Evidence of students will continue to develop in 2024.

In accordance with the Ordinance on the form and content of certificates, diplomas and diploma supplements (OG 74/2023) and as of 1 January 2024 higher education institutions are obliged to issue the digital form of certificates, diplomas and diploma supplements that contain the same data as those included in the public document issued in written form.

Through the project „Distribution of scholarships to students studying in STEM and ICT scientific fields“ that was approved through a public call and whose implementation commenced in the fourth quarter of 2023, a total of 1,365 scholarships were awarded, with a total amount of 4,9 million euro spent for this purpose so far. The project's aim is to increase the accessibility and employability of higher education graduates in the STEM and ICT fields at the undergraduate and graduate level by distributing scholarships for the 2023/24 academic year.

Pursuant to the new Act on Higher Education and Scientific Activity (OG 119/22) and the Government Regulation on Programme Funding for Public Higher Education Institutions and Public Research Institutes from July 2023, a new funding model for higher education institutions and public research institutes was introduced through funding agreements that will define each institution's goals as well as ensure the funds for their achievement. The aim of the new funding model is to solve the issues of the current insufficient institutional funding of scientific activity of public higher education institutions and public research institutes. Through funding agreements more public funds will be distributed gradually on the basis of transparent and commonly defined criteria based on results that are related to development goals and planned investments.

In vocational education, further development of the quality assurance framework will continue by optimizing, rationalizing and adapting vocational curricula to the needs of the economy, supporting vocational schools in their profiling (creating short- and medium-term development plans in cooperation with local communities and various stakeholders) in order to strengthen their autonomy

and flexibility, continuously strengthening the capacity of vocational teachers and institutions and encouraging the internationalization of education as well as the international mobility of students and teachers.

The regional centres of competence in vocational education and training (RCCs) will be provided with support in further strengthening the organizational, operational and professional capacities, in networking with partner institutions and economic entities, developing mechanisms for connecting RCCs with the European Platform for Centers of Vocational Excellence, as well as in raising the quality and competitiveness at national and international level.

Furthermore, the National Implementation Plan for VET until 2027 aims to increase the attractiveness of vocational education and training in Croatia, improve its image and to promote vocational education and training as a desirable career choice.

National and regional implementation activities are planned, adapted to different target groups in order to raise the visibility and attractiveness of vocational education and training and to promote its attractiveness and innovative aspect as well as the importance of vocational skills for the development of the economy and modern society. Large-scale events (e.g. national skills competitions based on the WorldSkills model, job fairs, etc.) and other forms of promotional events highlighting the importance of VET will be held, in collaboration with VET stakeholders.

In addition, the participation of Croatian teams in the EuroSkills and WorldSkills competitions will contribute to promoting the Croatian system of vocational education and training.

Moldova

European Commission Republic of Moldova Country Report 2023¹¹ states that Moldova has some level of preparation in the area of education and culture. Some progress was made in the reporting period. The country's education system is broadly aligned with EU policy and practice, although students' learning outcomes lag behind the European average. The accessibility and inclusiveness of education vary across the country's urban and rural areas, as does the quality of teaching and learning. Further efforts are needed to better match the vocational education and training (VET) skills on offer with labour market needs.

In the coming year, Moldova should in particular:

- promote reforms to consolidate quality and efficiency of the school network in both general education and VET;
- strengthen the continuous professional development of teachers and school leaders in line with the recently adopted national education strategy for 2030;

¹¹https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/d8ef3ca9-2191-46e7-b9b8-946363f6db91_en?filename=SWD_2023_698%20Moldova%20report.pdf

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“¹²

Montenegro

Montenegro 2023 Report¹³ by the European Commission states the following:

„Montenegro has a good level of preparation in this area. Some progress was made during the reporting period although certain steps were taken towards achieving more inclusive education. However, increased efforts are needed to progress on other outstanding recommendations. Therefore, last year's recommendations remain valid.

In the coming year, Montenegro should in particular:

- adopt a budgeted plan including an economic impact analysis for wide-ranging education reforms, also addressing inclusive education, and improve access to quality education at all education levels;
- speed up the implementation of the new strategy on early and preschool education for 2021-2025 to improve preschool enrolment for all children;
- finalise and adopt the 2022-2023 national vocational education and training (VET) implementation plan under the VET strategy for 2020-2024, and put in place the mechanism to evaluate practical learning at VET and higher education levels

The European Commission Assessment of the Economic Reform Programme 2021 - 2023¹⁴ still recognizes “A mismatch of skills remains a significant challenge, particularly for graduates of vocational

¹² <http://extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/mol191490.pdf>

¹³ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-report-2023_en

¹⁴ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/fb39454d-b5d1-4fd0-88eb-bccdc5e97ed6_en?filename=Montenegro%202023%20ERP%20assessment%20SWD_2023_106.pdf

education and training or higher education, despite some recent efforts to improve the transition from education and training to the labour market. The quality and relevance of the entire education system and the lack of practical experience of graduates from vocational and higher education are long-standing challenges.“

North Macedonia

North Macedonia 2023 Report¹⁵ states:

„North Macedonia is moderately prepared in the area of education and culture. Limited progress was made in the reporting period with the adoption and introduction of guidelines and programmes to strengthen inclusiveness and promote green skills. The implementation of the 2018-2025 education strategy continued to be slow, as did the development of a proper monitoring system. The adoption of key legislation was further delayed. The recommendations of last year’s report remain valid.

In the coming year, North Macedonia should in particular:

- finalise and adopt the Law on secondary education and the Law on vocational education and training and set up and operationalise the regional VET centres;
 - adopt the Law for adult education;
 - improve access to quality education for all, in particular children with disabilities and children from Roma communities;
- and increase pre-school enrolment and continue improving support for teachers’ training and professional development.

The Assessment of Economic Reform Programme 2024 - 2026¹⁶ recognizes that „the education system does not adequately equip young people with the key competences – skills and knowledge – that they need to actively participate in the labour market. North Macedonia has made good progress in terms of raising the number of people with higher education, but an inadequate quality of education and business structures is contributing to the persistently high level of unemployment and a still significant share of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET). The education strategy and related action plan prioritise equipping young people with high quality skills to prepare them for the labour market, but state financial support is insufficient and intersectoral coordination still needs further improvement. Students and families receive limited career guidance when making important choices and curricula are not always consistent with labour market needs. 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

¹⁵ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/28a9322a-3f18-434e-89d2-0890c90b2f96_en?filename=SWD_2023_693%20North%20Macedonia%20report.pdf

¹⁶ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/e0dec45e-ab57-45ab-b8ca-6c09c6da9488_en?filename=North%20Macedonia%202023%20ERP%20assessment%20SWD_2023_109.pdf

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).”

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

The new Strategy for Education Development in Serbia 2030 with the accompanying Action Plan (2021-2023) was adopted in June 2021. A new Action Plan covering the period from 2023-2026. was adopted by the government in October 2023.

The first and second annual reports on implementation of the Strategy, covering the period until end of 2022 were prepared and published on the Ministry's website.

The next report on implementation, covering year 2023, will be finalized in the first quarter of 2024, in accordance with the deadlines set by the Law on the Planning System.

Currently all Ministry departments, in accordance with their defined responsibilities, contribute to the monitoring and reporting activities, with assistance from consultants engaged through available IPA service contracts..

Starting from 2024, this process will be structured in a more permanent way through establishing of a Standing structure for monitoring and evaluation of education policy implementation with improved analytical support - "Permanent Strategic Working Group" (PSWG) composed of all permanent operational-level decision-makers from the Ministry of Education and other relevant institutions (including the two institutes).

The PSWG will be the focal point for cooperation with donors, creditors, TA teams engaged to provide expert support etc. It will be responsible for reporting on implementation of current strategic frameworks as well as for drafting of all future strategic documents in the field of education.

In addition, the European Commission's Country report Serbia 2023¹⁷ states:

Serbia is at a good level of preparation in the area of education and culture. Some progress was made on implementing last year's recommendations, by consolidating the national qualifications framework (NQF) system and taking some steps to ensure compliance of the quality assurance system in higher education with the recommendations of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and by amending a number of laws in the field of education.

Last year's recommendations remain largely valid. In the coming year, Serbia should in particular:

- increase participation in early childhood education and care, in particular of children from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- continue with the operationalisation of the NQF system, with additional focus on the quality and scope of non-formal education, as well as higher education; and
- ensure full compliance of the policy and institutional framework for quality assurance in higher education with the recommendations of the ENQA.

¹⁷ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9198cd1a-c8c9-4973-90ac-b6ba6bd72b53_en?filename=SWD_2023_695_Serbia.pdf

The European Commission assessment of the ERP for Serbia¹⁸ identifies

„The share of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) remains high. School-to-work transitions remain as in other economies of the region more difficult than in the EU average. The introduction of the Youth Guarantee aims to address these challenges but the preparatory work for the introduction of the measure is not yet finalised, and the Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan is pending for adoption.“

¹⁸ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/8de2f821-f453-4fd5-9cad-f9aa90c6ef9d_en?filename=Serbia%202023%20ERP%20assessment%20SWD_2023_108.pdf

Annex 2. Activity plan 2024

Annex 2.1. Regular activities

Timeline 2024	CORE ERI SEE Activities	Deliverables
February	ERI SEE Governing Board Meeting	Adopted Work Programme 2024; Financial Plan 2024, Activity Report 2023, Financial Report 2023
March	Study visit Scotland QAA for WB6 QAA	Training on the ESG, peer learning
April	WBA4WBL Regional meeting on the training programme	Endorsed training programme for agriculture
May/June	Regional Meeting of the WBA4WBL	Finalized teaching and learning Material for Locksmith
June	Meeting of the Teacher education and training network	Guidelines for digital material
September	Maintenance of the JIS portal	Update on the study programmes
October/November	ERI SEE Governing Board meeting	Reporting on the implementation of the Financial Plan and Work Programme 2024
December	Newsletter	December

Annex 2.2. Project activities – EQET SEE

QUALITY ASSURANCE – CONTENT-RELATED ACTIVITIES		
TRAINING NEEDS ANALYSIS ACTIVITIES		
January – March 2024	Implementation of national questionnaires and analysis of the results	National obligation: NCPs, National working groups
METHODOLOGIES ACTIVITIES		
February 2024	Good European practices in the implementation of the external evaluation methodologies	Publication finalized, designed and published

February / March 2024	National meetings for the adjustment/discussion on integration the Good European practices publication in national systems	2 national meetings, min. 7 participants (5- 6 experts + NCP), integrated best practices into national procedures or policies
AS A RESULT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ANALYSIS OF NEEDS OF EXTERNAL EVALUATORS, A REGIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMME FOR EXTERNAL EVALUATORS CAN BE DEVELOPED:		
November 2023 – January 2024	Development of the regional training programme for trainers of external evaluators	External expert
February – March 2024	Meetings for the Finalisation of the regional training programmes	3 meetings, endorsed regional training programmes
April – May 2024	Delivery of regional trainings of trainers of external evaluators - 3 meetings (3 days)	3 meetings, trained trainers
June - July 2024	National activity - National meetings for the adaptation of the regional training modules to national specificities, based on the results of the questionnaire	7 economies, 2 meetings per economy, adjusted regional training modules
September – December 2024	National activity - Implementation of National trainings of external evaluators	Implemented trainings at national levels
September – December 2024	National activity - Piloting of Good European Practices in 3 schools per economy	Good practices integrated into national systems
COMPILING EVERYTHING THAT WAS PRODUCED INTO THE INTERNAL QUALITY MECHANISMS FOR QUALITY AGENCIES – FINAL PART OF THE PROJECT		
May – September 2024	Regional quality guidelines and procedures for quality agencies (including HR policies)	1 regional meeting online, developed internal guidelines and procedures
CLOSING CONFERENCE AND ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY, TO ENHANCE REGIONAL COORDINATION IN THE SEE REGION AND PROMOTE PUBLICATION QA BEST PRACTICES		
December 2024 / January 2025	Closing conference	1 day, 80 participants, international conference

Content-related activities: VET		
Project management activities		
Eight Project management meeting	February 2023	Agreement on processes and timeline
Nineth Project management meeting	April 2024	Agreement on processes and timeline
Tenth Project management meeting	October 2024	Agreement on processes and timeline
ERI SEE - Third project reporting and audit	February - March 2025 (deadline 31/05/25)	Reports – narrative, financial, audit
Qualification standard - Locksmith		
QS 1 - Adoption/integration in national procedures	December 23 - January 2024	QS in the system
Teaching and learning material - agriculture		
Adjustment of the material at national level	By March 2024	TLM in national systems
Teaching and learning material - locksmith		
Regional development of teaching and learning material - meeting one	February 2024	TLM preparation
Regional development of teaching and learning material – two	March 2024	TLM preparation
Regional development of teaching and learning material – three	April 2024	TLM preparation
Regional development of teaching and learning material - four	May 2024	TLM preparation
Final regional consolidation meeting	June 2024	TLM finalization and endorsement
Adjustment of the material at national level	July - October 2024	TLM integration into national systems
Training programme - Agriculture		
Experts developing standard and training programme for teachers (WBL, Curricula and ESG) and for instructors (WBL with ped and did, and ESG)	January 2024	Training programme preparation
Experts developing material for trainings for teachers (WBL, Curricula and ESG) and	February 2024	Training material preparation

for instructors (WBL with ped and did, and ESG)		
Regional meeting for development/endorsement of training programme	March 2024	Training programme endorsed
Training programme implementation - agriculture		
Implementation of the training programme for trainers	April - May 2024	Training programme implemented regionally
National implementation of trainings	June - September 2024	Training programme implemented nationally
Training programme development - locksmith		
Experts developing standard and training programme for teachers (WBL, Curricula and ESG) and for instructors (WBL with ped and did, and ESG)	June 2024	Training programme preparation
Experts developing material for trainings for teachers (WBL, Curricula and ESG) and for instructors (WBL with ped and did, and ESG)	July 2024	Training material preparation
Regional meeting for development/endorsement of training curricula	September 2024	Training programme endorsed
Training programme implementation - locksmith		
Implementation of the training programme for trainers	October - November 2024	Training programme implemented regionally
National implementation of trainings	December - January 2024	Training programme implemented nationally

Annex 2.3. Project activities – RESET

Timeline 2024	GIZ Activities	Deliverables
March	On-line conference on renewable energy	Increasing awareness of RE
April/May	Analysis and translation of learning content for RE	Proposals for regional discussions
June	PR work	Articles

September	Conference – presentation of conclusions from the labour market study	Regional consensus
October	Regional meeting for recommendations and adjustment of learning content	Regional learning content
November	PR work	Articles