

Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE) Work Programme 2025

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INTRODUCTION

History of ERI SEE

The establishment of the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe is closely connected to the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe (SPSEE), initiated by the European Union with the aim to **strengthen peace, democracy, human rights and economy in South Eastern Europe after 1999**. The Stability Pact, active from 1999 – 2008, included, apart from the European Union, a number of international partners, such as Council of Europe, European Commission, United Nations, OECD, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, European Investment Forum etc. who were supporting the developments in the region. Since its launch in 1999, the Pact has been a key vehicle to foster regional cooperation, and a mechanism to coordinate international assistance. Over 90 percent of support through the Stability Pact came from European countries, used for regional economic cooperation and democratic reforms, infrastructure, and cross-border security and law enforcement programs. The term South Eastern Europe was actively promoted at that time, void of any political or historical connotations and focusing only on geographical area. The SEE economies included in the South Eastern Europe were Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo*, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania and Serbia as member partners.

Education and training were seen as one of the levers for strengthening peace, democracy and cooperation in the region. Education and training were strongly emphasized under the Graz Process and Enhanced Graz Process, initiated by the Austrian EU presidency in 1998. Through this initiative, that became a part of the Stability pact measures, EU countries were providing support to the countries of SEE in their efforts to foster peace, democracy, respect for human rights and economic prosperity for the stability of the region. In these efforts, education and youth were seen as priority areas that can bring people together and strengthen capacities of the region.

To operationalize endeavours of the Graz Process, a Task Force Education and Youth of the Stability Pact was established, which, in 2002, developed the South Eastern European Education Reform Initiative Action Plan. This was the beginning of actions that will later on establish the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe and its Secretariat. In 2004, the Task Force promoted regional ownership of the reform process by working to establish a Regional Secretariat for the Education Reform Initiative of South East Europe (ERI SEE), in the form of the ERI SEE Agency, established in Zagreb, Croatia and supported and staffed by South Eastern Europe countries. The Task Force focused on implementation of education reforms, and organized seminars to promote decentralization, education development for disabled and at-risk students, life-long learning, human rights, and democratic citizenship.

In 2004, Stability Pact leadership put more emphasis on preparing the region to take full responsibility for existing Stability Pact initiatives. With maturing of the region and its stabilisation, in 2008 the Regional Cooperation Council was founded, as a successor of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. It was regionally owned and governed, and charged with the implementation of strategies relevant for South Eastern Europe.

The first ERI SEE Agency was considered on the occasion of the 8th Conference of European Ministers of Education, in Oslo, with Zagreb selected as a host city. The legal status of the Agency was a Government Agency, established by the Decree of the Government in 2005. It was functioning from 2006 till 2010, when it was closed and new arrangements, to have it established in Belgrade, as an international organization, were being made. From 2010 – 2015 the ERI SEE Secretariat functioned as the Interim Secretariat, hosted within the Centre of Education Policy in Belgrade, while measures for its full and independent functioning were being prepared.

ERI SEE Founding documents

For ERI SEE, 4 international agreements are relevant:

1. Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) 2003, Nicosia

This MoU was signed by the Ministers of Education and Higher Education of SEE: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, who gave a strong support to the South Eastern European Education Reform Initiative. They recognized the achievements of the Enhanced Graz Process and in particular, those of the Task Force for Education and Youth of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, and requested further concrete actions, in the form of the Detailed work programme on the follow up of the objectives of Education and Training Systems in Europe, as a means to strengthen cooperation with regard to ongoing reform processes of the education systems. South Eastern Europe is, by this MoU, seen as the part of the evolving wider European area of education, and for the first time at regional level, the joint commitment was agreed to the implementation of the Bologna Declaration, Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region the Lisbon convention (Lisbon Recognition Convention), and Copenhagen Declaration.

2. Memorandum of Understanding 2007, Istanbul

This MoU was signed between the Ministers responsible for Education, Science and Research in South Eastern Europe from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo* (as provisional institutions of self-government and UN mission in Kosovo), Montenegro, Romania, Macedonia, Moldova, Serbia and the special coordinator of the Stability Pact for SEE and Task Force Education and Youth. This MoU renews the commitments to regional cooperation in education and to the EU Education and Training processes and recognizes the need for a gradual shift from assistance to cooperation in SEE, to cooperation and partnership. This also implies the strengthening of the regional ownership of cooperation in the region. The institutionalization of the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe as a regional platform for policy and expert cooperation in SEE in education is recognized and confirmed as the main implementation framework of this Memorandum in education. The MoU recognizes the necessity of continuing support (also including financial commitment) for ERI SEE, as this will lead to full and independent regional ownership of ERI SEE activities and structure.

This MoU defines the principles of regional cooperation:

- Developed Framework for action (a part of the Memorandum)
- Open method of coordination as applied by the EU, through peer learning, exchange of good practices, indicators and benchmarks
- ERI SEE is linked to RCC (RCC as the successor structure of the Stability Pact) and its priority pillar Building Human Capital
- Of paramount importance: Joint identification of common priorities and implementation of joint activities in line with the present Memorandum

The ERI SEE is seen as an organization with the task of supporting the implementation of education reform in South Eastern Europe, taking into account both country specific needs and demands in education reform, as well as present trends in the development of the European Education Area, however an adequate political mandate for future operation of the ERI SEE will be needed. The role of the ERI SEE Governing board should ensure institutional representation and gradual increase in in-kind and financial support to ERI SEE by countries – signatories to the Memorandum.

At the time of this MoU, the Secretariat was located in Zagreb, Croatia.

3. Memorandum of Understanding on the Role and Organization of the Education Reform Initiative of South East Europe – ERI SEE, 2010, Brdo

This MoU was originally signed by Ministers responsible for Education and Higher Education of Albania, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia; while Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina joined through an additional protocol.

ERI SEE is hereby recognized as the regionally owned and sustainable organization and its mission is defined as *To support sustainable education reforms on national levels through regional and international cooperation, To supporting capacity building for increased use of European cooperation instruments and To serve as an interface to developments in EU initiatives in education and adjusting the ERI SEE thematic areas to cooperation contexts in SEE and EU.*

The MoU defines the institutional structure, composed of the Governing Board, Consultative Body and ERI SEE Secretariat. The operations of the ERI SEE are ensured through the annual contributions of ERI SEE Members. It also announces the agreement on the new Seat of the ERI SEE Secretariat and interim arrangements between ERI SEE Agency in Zagreb, and Secretariat to be hosted by the new Host Country.

4. International Agreement – between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the 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 („Host-country Agreement“, HCA), 2013 – 2015

This International (Host-country) Agreement was signed by authorized representatives from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro and Serbia. The novelty it brought is the description of the process of establishment of the ERI SEE Secretariat as a legal entity; defining the seat of the Secretariat and its status (international organization, diplomatic mission with certain privileges and immunities); defining obligations of the host country (Serbia) such as equipment, premises, operational costs etc.; re-iterating financial contributions for the Secretariat of the Member countries and Host Country; consisting of local and international staff. The Host-country Agreement also defines the applicable laws and regulations that govern the day-to-day operations of the Secretariat. The Host-Country Agreement was being signed in the period from 2013 – 2015, after which it entered the ratification process from 2016 – 2017.

As of 1st January 2018, the ERI SEE Secretariat has been functioning as an international organization, seated in Belgrade, with the status of the Diplomatic mission registered at the Diplomatic protocol of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia.

Mission and vision

Highlights: The mission statement is to facilitate and enhance regional cooperation in the field of education and training that supports national reform processes and connects the region to EU education and training trends.

The vision is to create a strong and resilient South Eastern European education area where everyday exchange of ideas and practices among experts and practitioners is a reality, and joint regional work on most relevant education and training topics is a frequent process, coordinated by the ERI SEE.

In line with the founding documents explained in previous chapter, the mission of ERI SEE and its Secretariat shall in 2025 remain the same as in previous period.

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The vision is *to create a strong and resilient South Eastern European education area where everyday exchange of ideas and practices among experts and practitioners is a reality, and joint regional work on most relevant education and training topics is a frequent process, coordinated by the ERI SEE.*

These vision and mission statements build on the long-standing processes, first the Stabilisation Pact for South Eastern Europe, and then on regional initiatives, Berlin process and EU accession processes. The Berlin process is a cooperation platform, initiated by Germany, in cooperation with other EU member countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovenia and United Kingdom) and Western Balkan economies (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia), established with a goal of improving both inter-regional cooperation, as well as cooperation between the region and EU, in the process of meeting the EU standards through a number of concrete actions (establishing the Common Regional Market Area within the region, cooperating in the field of energy security and energy transition, social and economic inclusion of minorities and others). Within the Berlin process, the Western Balkan economies cooperate in a consistent and inclusive format on a number of themes of joint interest, bringing governments, EU institutions, international financial institutions, and regional organizations, together.

The ERI SEE's objectives are:

- a) To contribute to the full integration of SEE into the emerging wider European Area of Education and to the success and sustainability of the EU integration process;
- b) To provide a platform which supports sustainable education reforms in SEE through regional capacity building, transfer of know-how, exchange of experience, peer– learning and linking these efforts to European frameworks for education development;
- c) To develop and maintain an innovative cooperation network as an added-value for national education development efforts in SEE and as an interface to relevant EU, European and international initiatives and networks in education;
- e) To address more global developments in education and training, for example the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

ERI SEE GOVERNANCE

The Governing Structure

Highlights: The governance of the ERI SEE includes the ERI SEE Governing Board, which is assisted by its Consultative Body, and ERI SEE Secretariat, which implements the decisions of the Governing Board. The Governing Board is governed by the Chair appointed by the Host Country, and the Secretariat by the Director appointed by the Governing Board. In 2025, the Governing Board will appoint a new ERI SEE Secretariat Director after the completion of the international selection procedure.

The governing structure includes the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE) Governing Board, chaired by the Chair who is the representative of the Host country and appointed by the Ministry of education, and members of the Governing Board, who are representatives of member countries and ministries in charge of education. The Governing Board is the decision making body of ERI SEE, responsible for developing ERI SEE policies and strategies.

ERI SEE Governing Board has 7 representatives from 7 member countries, OeAD as the regular annual donor of the ERI SEE, and RCC as the successor of the Stability pact. In the decision making process, each member has 1 vote. The work of the Governing Board is defined by the Statute of the ERI SEE and its Rulebook on the work of the Governing Board.

In 2025 the Governing Board is planned to meet twice. The topics for consideration of the Governing Board in 2025 will include the adoption of the Annual Work Programme for 2025, adoption of the Annual Report on the implementation of the Annual Work Programme for 2024, adopting the Annual Financial Report for 2024 and the accompanying Audit Report, as well as Financial Plan for 2025.

Another important issue for the consideration of the Governing Board will be the appointment of the new ERI SEE Secretariat Director. The current Director, Ms Tina Šarić, has decided not to extend her mandate for another 3-year period upon which the Vacancy for the position of the ERI SEE Secretariat Director was announced in September 2024. The Governing Board members will appoint its representatives for the Selection Panel, which will consider the applications received and follow through the selection procedure, and confirm its decision with the whole Governing Board. The new ERI SEE Secretariat Director is planned to take over the executive managing role over the ERI SEE Secretariat as of 1st November 2025.

In its work, the Governing Board is joined by the Consultative Body, composed of partner organizations relevant for the work of the ERI SEE, such as Austrian Federal Ministry of Education and European Training Foundation.

The next level in the ERI SEE governance is the ERI SEE Secretariat, which provides technical, organisational and analytical support to its Director and the Governing Board, and supports the implementation of the Governing Board decisions. The Secretariat is managed by the ERI SEE Director, who is authorized by the Governing Board to organize operation of the Secretariat, undertake all legal actions for and on behalf of the Secretariat, including the signature of contracts; represents the Secretariat in all judicial, administrative or any other proceedings; and prepares the drafts Annual Work Programme, annual budget, and annual financial and activity reports for the adoption by the Governing Board.

Strategic Development

Highlights: In 2025, the ERI SEE Secretariat will:

- *continue to support its thematically-based networks (the SEE VET Net, SEE TET, Network of experts in Quality Assurance in pre-tertiary education, Joint Regional Working Group on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications and Quality Assurance, and the Western Balkans Alliance for Work-based Learning*
- *finalize the existing EQET SEE and RESET projects and start negotiating new ones*
- *strive to support policy consultations at regional level*
- *strive to establish stronger connections with the EU Commission*

In the preceding years, the ERI SEE and its Secretariat have established a strong position in the South Eastern European region, in the field of education and training. ERI SEE established strong thematically-based networks that are ERI SEE's main partners and collaborators on numerous activities in the region. Namely, these networks include:

- The SEE VET Net: the Network of South Eastern European Vocational Education and Training agencies and experts
- The SEE TET: the Network of South Eastern European Teacher Education and Training agencies
- The Network of experts in Quality Assurance in pre-tertiary education: composed of institutions and experts dealing with external evaluation of schools
- The ERI SEE – RCC Joint Regional Working Group on Recognition of Higher Education (HE) Qualifications and Quality Assurance: the network of bodies involved in the recognition of HE qualification processes and quality assurance of higher education institutions
- The Western Balkans Alliance for Work-based Learning: the alliance of VET centres and chambers of commerce

All the ERI SEE activities are planned and organized in cooperation with the representatives of these networks, serving their interests and needs. The activities are organized in the format of regional workshops, trainings, study visits, conferences and projects. The collaboration between the Secretariat and the partners from the networks has on many occasions been characterized as efficient, beneficial, addressing the right needs of the partners, and as resulting in useful outputs that are, from regional level, adjusted and integrated into national contexts. Such cooperation is planned to continue in 2025, and will be described in more details in the following chapters.

In 2025, and in following years, ERI SEE Secretariat will strive to strengthen its position in 3 other important areas, not neglecting the relationships with the partners and networks mentioned above. Namely, the 3 important areas of further strategic development for ERI SEE include:

- a. Stability and growth of the ERI SEE Secretariat

The 2025 will be the year when 2 regional projects are closing – Enhancements in the Quality of Education and Training in South Eastern Europe (EQET SEE), funded by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) with funds from Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC) and Renewable Energy Services in Education and Training (RESET), funded by the German Corporation for International Cooperation (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH). Closing of the projects implies closing conferences, external audit

and reporting, and upon the approval of the report and eligible costs, the payment of the final balance (10% of the amount contracted by the donor).

The closing of 2 regional projects means intensifying the administrative and financial work and reduction in the number of regional activities, meetings, conferences etc. It is important to note that this is a normal phase in the project life cycle. At the same time, the 2025 will be the year when the new projects are planned in consultation with the partners, to ensure future regional cooperation and its adequate funding. Following the project life cycle and experiences so far in negotiating with the potential donors, it takes a certain amount of time to develop and fine-tune the project idea and start with the new project/s. In concrete terms, this means that the project ideas that will be discussed and developed in 2025, but that it can reach its final approval phase sometime in 2026.

Considering this time gap between the finalization of existing projects and contracting new ones, it is important to secure the stability of the ERI SEE Secretariat by which it could function operationally and continue to support regional cooperation (even though to a lower scale) in between the projects. This means that the funding for the ERI SEE Secretariat staff, operational costs and regional meetings that enable functioning of the ERI SEE thematically-based networks is ensured outside of the framework of the donors projects.

In 2025 the focus of the attention, in strategic sense, will be on closing the existing projects, negotiating the new ones, and exploring possibilities for additional funding for operational purposes, outside of the project frameworks.

b. Supporting consultations at regional level

When talking about the policy making process and involvement in policy consultations, it implies stronger connections with the ministries in charge of education and stronger involvement in the consultation processes, but also visibility activities. ERI SEE needs to be very diplomatic in these processes, as the role of the ERI SEE is not to interfere with national policies; but simply to offer information and expertise and be involved so that the regional processes can support the national ones. Another specificity of this process is that ERI SEE should strive to maintain cooperation with the ministry state officials, but also the top management positions, which requires for the balanced approach with decision makers and operational services of the ministries. In addition, the complexity of the process is also visible in the need for this approach to be balanced among the ERI SEE economies, where ERI SEE, as a regionally-owned organization, should be present in an equal manner and scope. Taking all this into consideration, the strategic strengthening of the ERI SEE should be a well thought-of process, handled in a very sensitive and diplomatic manner, in close cooperation and with the support of the representatives of the ERI SEE Governing Board who should act as liaisons between the ERI SEE Secretariat and ministries' hierarchies.

A step in that direction can be the organization of high-level Ministerial regional conferences which could serve as a platform for dialogue between the ministers and planning the future regional cooperation. The ERI SEE already has experience in this area, by organizing 2 high-level ministerial conferences; first one on the occasion of the ERI SEE launch in Belgrade 2018, and the second one in Skopje 2022 as the Ministerial conference oriented at the quality and quality assurance in higher education. To achieve the strategic impact and strengthen its strategic role, and at the same time respecting the human resources available at the ERI SEE Secretariat, the organization of such conferences could happen every 2 or 3 years, in cooperation with the ministries from the region, on a rotating base.

In 2025, ERI SEE plans to start lobbying for the organization of the next such conference in 2026, to be hosted in Tirana or Podgorica. The lobbying will be oriented at the financial resources, topics of interest for the region, and adequate – human, protocolarian and expert support from the ministries – which should all be agreed before entering into the operational phase. By regularly organizing such conferences and facilitating the dialogue

between the high-level decision makers from the region, and supporting policy developments, the strategic role of the ERI SEE will inherently grow.

c. Establishing stronger connections with the EU Commission and its bodies in the region

Another area of importance in which ERI SEE can further strengthen its position is around cooperation with the European Commission (EC). So far, the connections with the EC have been occasional and sporadic, limited to the cooperation with the Regional Cooperation Council on the subject of recognition of higher education qualifications; to European Delegation representatives participating in on-line exchanges of information about existing regional projects, coordinated by the ERI SEE, and contacts through European Training Foundation, ERI SEE's partner organization, on a number of different conferences.

This area has a large potential to be expanded. The focus of future endeavours of the ERI SEE, to be started in 2025, include establishing connection with the European Delegation offices across the region, and identifying areas of common interest. Furthermore, the mechanism of the Multibeneficiary Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance should be fully grasped by the ERI SEE and, in connection with the measure a. of this chapter, referring to closer relations with the ministries, utilized to a higher degree. However, in planning these activities, it must be fully understood that the Multibeneficiary IPA requires long-term planning and that the realization of projects under this funding instrument is often-times prone to delays and long awaiting period between the planning of an intervention and its actual start. This can have a negative impact on the negotiations and plans agreed with the partners as the situations can change through time and, by the beginning of the intervention, the plans may not necessarily reflect the current needs any more.

However, in 2025, it is planned to start building relationships with the European delegations officers in charge of education and training and explore possibilities for more concrete actions in cooperation with the European Commission.

THEMATIC ORIENTATION AND ACTIVITIES

Thematic areas of interest

Highlights: in 2025, along with the already well-established thematic areas (modernization of VET and cooperation with the business sector for greater labour market relevance; quality assurance of schools through capacity building in external evaluation; quality assurance in higher education through integration of European Standards and Guidelines in the Western Balkans; and teacher education and training in the area of digitalization), new themes have been identified as needed: Adult Education and Lifelong Learning, with relevance of mechanisms for recognition of prior learning (validation of non-formal and informal learning). These thematic areas will be addressed in 2025 in the manner and scope allowed for by the financial, human and time circumstances.

ERI SEE Secretariat defines its areas of interest through a consultative process that combines several levels of consultations:

- the analysis of the existing strategic documents at national levels (Education and training strategies, National action plans, Economic Reform Programmes, Recommendations by the European Commission etc.)
- the dialogue with the partners – ministries in charge of education and training and national agencies in charge of implementing policies
- the negotiations with the donor institutions and their funding strategies and priorities.

Based on the analysis and mapping of the existing data, the decisions are made in which priority areas of regional activities, managed and coordinated by the ERI SEE Secretariat, will be selected and around which further actions will be undertaken.

For 2025, the continuity in the direction of the ERI SEE and the region will be maintained, with the new identified areas of interest in which further actions will be taken.

The existing, continuing thematic areas are:

- Vocational education and training (VET), with the focus on modernization of VET, supporting the Green Agenda, enhancing cooperation with the business sector increasing the relevance of VET and addressing the skills mismatch, and contributing to the strengthening of the work-based learning
- Quality assurance in pre-tertiary education and training, with the focus on external evaluation of schools, including the self-evaluation processes and peer support
- Quality assurance in higher education, focusing on mechanisms supporting compliance of Western Balkans Quality Assurance Agencies with European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
- Teacher education and training, focusing on continuous professional development in the area of digitalization

The newly identified themes, recognized by ERI SEE regional partners, confirmed during an international conference on the subject of Lifelong Learning, and organized by the Albanian National Agency for VET and Qualifications, UNDP and ERI SEE, held in Vlore in November 2024 include.

- Adult education and Lifelong Learning, focusing on the re-skilling and up-skilling programmes and
- Recognition of prior learning (RPL), or Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL), particularly in the areas relevant for the Green Agenda

Considering the limited human resources capacities and financial constraints of the ERI SEE, not all thematic areas of interest will be addressed with the same intensity and with the same level of outputs.

More concretely, more intense cooperation in 2025 is expected around the planning of future cooperation (via a new regional project) that would combine the VET and adult education segments in the Green agenda, and quality assurance in pre-tertiary education. This planning involves consultations with the VET agencies, qualification agencies, chambers of commerce, and agencies for quality assurance in pre-tertiary education on the identification of specific topic, actions and desired results that would support national reform processes.

More concretely, the planning of the future regional cooperation at a larger scale, through a regional project, would combine:

1. VET sector: development of regionally-based occupational and qualification standards in the area of Green Agenda (renewable energies), curricula, teaching, learning and work-based learning material and trainings for teachers, with adjustments of the results to the needs of the adult education, including the definition of regional guidelines for recognition of prior learning.
2. QA – external evaluation sector: development of a support scheme in the implementation of external evaluation methodologies that would include peer-to-peer support, capacity building on self-evaluation and elaboration of work-based learning and VET evaluation.

Other thematic aspects, due to the time, financial and human capacity constraints, would be addressed to a lower level intensity. Namely, the thematic priority of higher education and compliance of the Western Balkan Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher education with the European Standards and Guidelines shall be addressed in cooperation with the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), via regional meetings and expert support contracted by the RCC. The support of Teacher education and training shall be limited to supporting the European Training Foundation in the implementation of the SELFIE tool for teachers across the Western Balkan region.

Activities and partners

Highlights: in 2025, ERI SEE Secretariat will close two regional projects: Enhancements of the Quality in Education and Training in South Eastern Europe (EQET SEE) and Renewable Energy Services in Education and Training (RESET). In addition to executing all the activities necessary for successful completion of these projects, it will also start working on new regional projects in collaboration with its partners and networks. The rule of 10% of the grant amount being paid after the approval of the final report, and consequent need to employ ERI SEE regular budget for the pre-funding of the project activities before its closure, may cause additional burden to ERI SEE regular functioning and request even more careful budget planning throughout the year.

In 2025, ERI SEE is going to build further its relationships with the most relevant actors in the field of education and training in the region – ministries of education (and in some cases ministries of economy and labour in charge of VET), Vocational Education and Training agencies (including dual education), Qualification agencies, Teacher education and training agencies, Quality assurance agencies, Chambers of commerce, and international partners such as Austrian Agency for Education and Internationalization, European Training Foundation, Western Balkan 6 Chamber Investment Forum, Regional Challenge Fund, GIZ, and others. This cooperation is going to take the form of participation at activities within regional projects, including the development of intellectual products; exchange of information and practices at various events organized by partner organizations; providing feedback or comments on the documents produces by partner organizations etc.

In this way, ERI SEE will remain present and visible as an important regional player in the facilitation and enhancements of regional cooperation, building on at the same time on its expertise, consultative practices and policy contributions.

The following activities, involving participation of regional partners, are described in the following sub-chapters.

Enhancements in the Quality of Education and Training in South Eastern Europe (EQET SEE) project

The Enhancements in the Quality of Education and Training in South Eastern Europe (EQET SEE), funded by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) with funds of Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC) project started on 1st October 2019 and will finish on 31st March 2025. The total duration of the project is 42 months, with the total budget of 2.027.399,00 EUR, of which 89,52% coming from the ADC (1.815.000,00 EUR) and 10,48% coming from ERI SEE budget (212.399,00 EUR). The project connected more than 20 national institutions from the region (VET agencies, qualification agencies, chambers of commerce and quality assurance agencies in pre-tertiary education)

The EQET SEE project contributed to the development of labour-market oriented, socially inclusive and high quality education by increasing the labour market relevance of VET provision and enhancing quality assurance (aspects of external evaluation of institutions) in pre-tertiary education. It has been coordinated with the regional networks: the Western Balkans Alliance for work-based learning (gathering the VET national agencies, and national chambers of commerce), qualification agencies, and QA agencies). The project consisted of two strands – VET (cooperation with the business sector, labour-market relevance of VET, greater representation of work-based learning elements in the curricula and supporting teachers and company instructors in the implementation of these curricula), and QA (aspects of external evaluation of schools and enhancing communication between policy makers and policy implementors and schools, internal quality systems and overall quality improvements of the external evaluation processes.)

More concretely, the VET component focused on the development of regionally-based, labour market oriented occupational (OS), qualifications standards (QS) and VET curricula incorporating work-based learning, and assuring quality of VET provision through developing supporting measures and material (guidelines for work-based learning, trainings for teachers and company instructors and teaching and learning material.

QA components focused on developing quality standards, procedures and trainings for quality agencies themselves, and supporting the system through promoting good practices in the implementation of external evaluation methodologies, instruments and tools.

In 2025, the project will reach its conclusion, through the implementation of following remaining activities:

- **Study visit for the VET component of the project.** This study visit will connect VET agencies and chambers of commerce with a European-based institutions with strong experiences in flexible VET curricula, work-based learning mechanisms, adult education provision and established validation of non-formal and informal learning practices. These topics are relevant for the closure of the project as the focus of the partners is turning more and more on the listed topics; with the idea and plans to expand the already produced EQET SEE products to serve the needs of adult education systems in respective economies. With the information gained through the study visit, the principles of using formal education results for non-formal environment will be clearer; the results will be further used and expanded, and sustainability will be ensured even more.
- **External evaluation of the project.** External evaluation will be implemented by external experts who will be evaluating the coherence, sustainability and effectiveness of the project and its results across the region.
- **Translation and design of publications.** The EQET SEE project produced a number of valuable material and publications, such as, for example, the Teaching and Learning Material and Work-based Learning Guidelines for Agricultural Technician of Traditional and Organic Production and Locksmith, Good Practices in the Implementation of External Evaluation Practices, and a number of publications on environment, social and gender aspects. These publications are planned to be

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- used in the education systems across the region, for which its translation into national languages and design is needed.
- **Regional Closing conference.** Closing conference will be an opportunity to connect all that has been done throughout the project with all the implementing partners and stakeholders. The Closing conference will present the results and experiences of participating in the project, allow for discussion on the next phase in the regional cooperation, connect with other projects in the region and emphasize the importance of Environmental, Social and Gender (ESG) components of the project and its results.
 - **National promotional closing events.** As side events to the Regional Closing Conference, within the scope of the project, 7 additional promotional closing events will be held across the region (in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) to present in details the experiences of regional cooperation, its relevance for national processes, and integration of regional products into national contexts. These events will also be used by partner institutions to shed light on additional topics of national relevance and shape them into a Letter of intent/Conclusions/Recommendations for future regional actions.
 - **Final reporting.** Final reporting will sum up and report on everything done within the scope of the project, identify the lessons learnt, challenges and good practices, and compare the final results with the set indicators.
 - **Final audit.** Final audit will serve as the examination of the eligibility of costs incurred during the project implementation, compared to the budget agreed between the donor and ERI SEE.

Important aspect of the implementation of a regional project EQET SEE refers to its financial rules. According to the Grant Agreement signed between the donor, ADA and ERI SEE, the Lead Partner of the project, 10% of the ADA project budget is kept as a reserve/guarantee factor until the final report and final audit are approved by ADA financial services. Only then, after the check is made on the expenditure, eligible costs and overall budget, can the remaining amount be released to the ERI SEE. This also means that for the activities in the last period of the project implementation, ERI SEE will have to use its own resources in order to pre-fund the remaining activities of the project and to finalize it according to the plans agreed in the project application and grant agreement.

The 10% of the overall ADA budget is 181.500,00 EUR, covering the actions until 31st March 2025. For ERI SEE Secretariat, this would mean that it has to pre-fund the remaining activities in the same amount. As it is not possible for the ERI SEE to do so, simply because it doesn't have this amount of funding on its regular accounts, the pre-funding will be in the amount that is possible for ERI SEE (approximately 80.000,00 EUR). As the result, the remaining 101.500,00 EUR will not be spent, and will be kept by the Austrian Development Agency. The remaining amount, or the balance payment, should be paid back to the ERI SEE within 3 months upon the submission of the final report – that is, by 31 August 2025.

This financial arrangement and financial flow has implications on other activities of the ERI SEE and supposes a careful management of the ERI SEE regular budget where a balance between the EQET SEE pre-funding of the project activities until the end of the project on the one hand, and regular ERI SEE activities, including the salaries of staff, on the other, has to be ensured.

Due to the financial limitations of the ERI SEE regular budget, and its direction into the finalization of the EQET SEE project, other ERI SEE activities – regular activities that depend on the ERI SEE regular budget – will have to be organized only after the balance payment of the ADA is received – in the last trimester of the 2025.

However, it is important to note that the ERI SEE human resources will be actively employed in the activities of finalizing the EQET SEE project, planning future regional cooperation through regional projects and regular activities, and finalizing another on-going project, all of which is described in the next sub-chapters.

Renewable Energy Services in Education and Training (RESET) project

*The Renewable Energy Services in Education and Training (RESET) project is a component within a larger regional project, *Decarbonization of the Electricity Sector in the Western Balkans*, funded by the GIZ. It contributes to the European Green Deal and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans by connecting the needs of the energy sector in the Western Balkans with the educational provision. The project duration is from 1st October 2023 until 30th September 2025 (24 months), with the budget of 189.733,50 EUR.*

The project consists of 2 work-packages: the first one is oriented at developing recommendations to TVET decision makers to accelerate the labour market and energy developments for Renewable Energy, and the second on Raising awareness and promoting TVET and education for Renewable Energy.

In 2025, the following activities are planned to be implemented:

- **Preparation of learning content for solar panel and wind turbine generator installers and maintainers.** This is the learning content to serve as the basis for formal and non-formal education programmes in the field of renewable energy. The partners have expressed their need for the learning content as well as for technical descriptions of needs for work-based learning.
- **National face-to-face events for schools and adult education providers promoting renewable energy education provision.** The learning content will be shared among the schools and adult education providers, together with emphasis on gender aspects of renewable energy transition. In addition the schools and adult education providers will be advised on the promotion activities of renewable energy provision. Their inputs will also be used for further development of recommendations and action plan for renewable energy in education and training.
- **Development of recommendations for regionally uniform learning content for solar panel and wind turbine generator installers and maintainers.** On the basis of the prepared learning content, the recommendations for the further development of the learning content, together with the exercises, assessment and technical specifications shall be developed.
- **Development of the action plan for further developments in the labour market and education and training sector targeting renewable energy.** On the basis of the recommendations, and consultations with the partners, together with the data collected through the labour market effects study and education provision study, the action plan will be elaborated to map next steps in the renewable energy developments in education and training.
- **National and regional press work.** National and regional press work will be used to promote further, among education and training and general public, the relevance of gender-sensitive renewable energy transition.

Considering the relevance of the Green Agenda in the Western Balkans, the RESET project will also serve to identify further needs of the education and training sector, so that they are addressed through the larger regional project that is to be planned in 2025.

Potential for cooperating on Revitalize Reconnect Reshape - RECONOMY programme

RECONOMY is leading a regional inclusive economic development program going on in 6 Western Balkan economies and 11 countries in Eastern Partnership, organized in partnership with the Swedish International Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation. The main goal of RECONOMY is to enable women and youth, including the most disadvantaged and excluded, to benefit from economic opportunities by increasing their income and taking up decent and green jobs, inclusively and sustainably.

On 5th December, the Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation and RECONOMY published a Call for proposals for the Development of Regional Occupation and Qualification Standards and training programme for the „Navigating the Road Ahead“ project in the Western Balkan region, in collaboration with Volvo Group.

The Call is a part of the joint project between the RECONOMY program, facilitated by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation, and the Volvo Group. It aims to address skills development in the trucking industry in the Western Balkans. This project focuses on enhancing vocational education and training (VET) to produce skilled mechatronics in the trucking industry, initially targeting Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The collaboration leverages Volvo's expertise and resources to improve the employability of women, youth, and disadvantaged groups by introducing a non-formal training for specialization in mechatronics for heavy-duty industrial equipment and commercial vehicles in selected VET schools, followed by a gradual introduction in the formal VET curricula.

Having in mind the ERI SEE expertise in the topics of developing regionally based occupational and qualification standards and training programmes, ERI SEE will apply to the Call. In case of ERI SEE's offer being accepted, the contract would include the activities of

- **Coordination and collaboration with stakeholders across the Western Balkans.** This would include cooperation with national education institutions, private sector stakeholders and Chambers of commerce ensuring the establishment of national working groups appointed by the respective authorities for the development of vocational regional occupation and qualifications standards and gender-sensitized training programs in six countries of the Western Balkans region.
- **Development of regional occupational and qualification standards and training programme.** This would imply organization and facilitation of online and onsite national and regional meetings for occupational and qualification standards and regional training program development, with the inclusion of Volvo and their expertise in the entire process of occupational and qualification standards and training program development.
- **Facilitation of the process of translation** of the standards of occupation and qualifications in local languages.
- **Promotion of regional collaboration and peer learning**

The added value of this potential regional engagement would be establishing contacts with the Swiss International Cooperation Agency (SIDA) upon which further collaboration prospects can be explored.

MANAGEMENT

Human resources

Highlights: the Secretariat currently functions with 3.3 employees and in 2025 the ERI SEE Secretariat will in 2025 get its new Director.

As mentioned earlier, the 2025 will see the change in the management structure, as the Director for the last 8,5 years (at the moment of composing this Work Programme), Ms Tina Šarić, is not extending her mandate and the new Director of the ERI SEE Secretariat shall be appointed. The Vacancy for this position was announced in September 2024, and the selection shall be performed by the Selection Panel- appointed representatives of the Governing Board. The selection is planned to be finalized by 31st March 2025, and the effective change of management is expected to happen on 1st November 2025.

The current ERI SEE Secretariat team consist of 3.3 employees (Director, 1 FTE, Regional Project Coordinator, 1 FTE, Sector Project Coordinator, 1 FTE and Financial Manager, 0.3 FTE). The future employments will be dependant on the Governing Board decisions, based on the availability of financial resources and complexity of tasks in the future periods. The official language of the ERI SEE is English.

The staff employed at the ERI SEE Secretariat possesses high professional standards, and experience in regional cooperation and project implementation. In their work, the staff promotes the culture of respect – both internally and externally, hard work and purposeful actions for the benefit of the region. In their day-to-day operations, the staff nurtures behaviours characteristic of a diplomatic mission that ERI SEE is – engaging in tactful, sensitive and polite conversations, with active listening and supportive professional relationships.

Financial resources

Highlights: in 2025, the ERI SEE budget will include several sources of funding: annual contributions of member countries, annual donation of OeAD, ADA balance payment for EQET SEE project and remaining tranches of the GIZ project.

In 2025, the ERI SEE Secretariat budget will consist of several different sources of funding:

- Annual contributions of ERI SEE member countries
- Annual donation by the Austrian Agency for Education and Internationalization
- ADA balance payment for the EQET SEE project
- GIZ payment for the remaining tranches within the RESET project

These funds will be subject to 3 audits – 1 for the management of the EQET SEE project funds, 1 for the management of the RESET funds, and 1 for the management of the regular ERI SEE budget.

The activities planned for 2025 are aligned with the budget available. Having in mind the situation with the EQET SEE project and 10% balance payment after the approval of the final report, and consequently using the regular ERI SEE budget for pre-funding of EQET SEE activities, the regular ERI SEE activities will be organized in the last trimester of 2025, in the scope the budget, time and human resources will allow it.

Considering the usual project practices where 10% is paid after the approval of the final report, ERI SEE shall, in 2025, explore options for securing additional, project non-related budget, that would allow for simpler pre-funding arrangements and stability of ERI SEE regular functioning in between projects.

Operational Risks and Mitigating Measures

Highlights: in 2025, the identified risks include the budgetary situation due to the 10% balance payment rule, and potential delays in the balance payment; lack of available regular budget to cover the activities of ERI SEE thematic networks, which may lead to the dissipation of these networks; lengthy procedure of new project development and approval, which may lead to loss in the momentum of regional cooperation; and changes in the government structures of ERI SEE countries, leading to the need of re-positioning of the ERI SEE in respective countries.

The budgetary situation in the previous sub-chapter presents an operational risk, as the 10% of the EQET SEE budget to be paid after the approval of the final report is much larger amount than ERI SEE can cover through its regular budget. This means that ERI SEE has to reduce the scope of some planned project actions to fit into the budget it has available.

In addition, even though the balance payment after the approval of the final report by ADA should happen within 3 months of submission of the final report, delays can happen. In case delays in the balance payment happen, they can have a serious impact on the stability of the ERI SEE Secretariat, jeopardizing even the payments of the staff salaries. In order to mitigate this risk, communication with ADA will be constant, emphasizing the importance of respecting the agreed deadlines; as well as communication with the members of the Governing Board, for potential additional funds or loans to ERI SEE for operational purposes.

Considering the budgetary situation at this point of time, ERI SEE Secretariat depends on projects for its functioning and mission and vision realization. However, it often happens that the budget for operational costs, including salaries, within project rules, does not allow for adequate funding for new employees. This means that the existing employees might get additionally burdened with new projects, so that the ERI SEE mission can be accomplished, while at the same time the employment of new staff will be made difficult due to the lack of adequate financial resources. This may lead to loss of the life-work balance, work dissatisfaction and turnover. The solution to this may again be the existence of some additional ERI SEE non-project related budget, that would allow for a top-up for additional employees in case the project budget is not satisfactory in this respect. Additional ERI SEE non-project related budget would also allow for a more stable in-between projects situation.

In 2025 potential sources of this non-project related budget shall be explored, via communication with the ministries and Governing Board members and potential other donors.

Considering the tight budget situation in 2025, the risk also exists in relation to the activities and networks that are not covered by projects, and more specifically deal with Teacher Education and Training Network and Regional working group for recognition of higher education qualifications and quality assurance. As smaller amounts of the budget can be allocated to these networks, there is a risk for these networks to become non-active.

Another risk, related to projects, refers to the need to reapply and negotiate with donors, which can be a lengthy process. First of all, negotiations with the partners from the region can take time, and resources may be needed to allow for physical meetings clarifying the details of the next phase in regional cooperation project. And then, negotiations with donors can also be long, needing to meet all the donor's requirements. The risk here is connected to the fact that, at the time the project may be approved, the needs identified at the beginning may

already vary; and the second risk is that the regional cooperation may lose its momentum and become less motivating for the partners. The mitigating measures may be organizing on-line meetings in case resources for additional face-to-face consultations are not available; and negotiating the new projects while the current ones are running – which can speed up the process of negotiations with the donor, but at the same time can put additional burden on the ERI SEE staff in terms of workload.

Additional risk is connected to the changes in the governing structures within the ministries in charge of education, and oftentimes lacking hand-over procedures and communication gaps between the incoming and outgoing political strands. For ERI SEE this can mean that the relations built within ministries can be changed quickly, with the new appointed staff not being aware of or acquainted with the ERI SEE activities and relevance for the region, which would mean that ERI SEE needs to build its position from the beginning. The mitigating measure could be direct communication between the ministries of ERI SEE member countries, and Governing Board members, to introduce the relevance of ERI SEE to newly appointed government structures, after which ERI SEE can take over further communication and relationship building.

ANNEXES

Annex 1. Strategic Documents of ERI SEE Member Countries

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 portal¹.

Albania

The European Commission recommendation within the Country Report Albania 2024², within the Chapter 26 Education and Culture, states:

Albania is moderately prepared in the field of education and culture. Some progress was made with the implementation of the National Strategy for Education 2021-2026 and the adoption of legislative acts to reform higher education. Albania still needs to strengthen the quality and inclusiveness of education. The Commission's recommendations from last year were partially implemented and remain mostly valid. In the coming year, Albania should in particular:

→ optimise further the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system further in line with the labour market needs;

→ further improve the professional development and training of teachers and trainers, with a focus on pedagogical skills for the implementation of the competence-based inclusive approach and digitalisation from pre-primary to university levels, including VET education;

The European Commission assessment of the ERP for Albania³ identifies challenges in education and the labor market, including high rates of early school leaving (17.5%) and low digital skills (23.8%), which are among the lowest in candidate countries. Rural-urban and socio-economic disparities in access to education persist, and nearly 27% of young people are neither in education, employment, nor training, nearly double the EU average. Although efforts to support vocational education and training (VET) have been made, the system remains underdeveloped, with low participation and insufficient engagement from the private sector. There is a need for further development of the VET system to better align it with labor market needs and reduce skills mismatches. Public spending on education has increased slightly, with salary reforms benefiting teachers and medical staff, yet the overall budget for education, health, and social protection remains relatively stable. To address these issues, Albania is focusing on improving student performance, particularly for disadvantaged groups, enhancing youth employability, and developing skills, especially in digital areas, to meet the needs of growing sectors like technology.

In Albania, significant projects in adult education and upskilling/reskilling have been underway in recent years. One such initiative is the Skills for Jobs (S4J) programme⁴. During 2023, the focus of the *Skills for Jobs* (S4J) programme in Albania was on improving vocational education and training (VET) systems, with particular emphasis on enhancing digitalization, work-based learning quality, and upskilling efforts, focusing on improving

¹ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/>

² https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a8eec3f9-b2ec-4cb1-8748-9058854dbc68_en?filename=Albania%20Report%202024.pdf

³ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8970-2024-INIT/en/pdf>

⁴ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/albania/national-reforms-vocational-education-and-training-and-adult>

vocational education and training (VET) with a particular emphasis on digitalization, quality in work-based learning, and upskilling. This project, implemented by Swisscontact with support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), has achieved results such as a 71.1% employment rate for VET graduates within a year.

Additionally, Albania's Ministry of Education and Sports has been working on enhancing lifelong learning and vocational education frameworks. This includes integrating upskilling and reskilling pathways into national policy reforms, especially with regard to adult education. These efforts align with the broader goals of the Albanian government to boost employability and reduce skill mismatches in the labor market.⁵

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Bosnia and Herzegovina 2024 Report⁶, European Commission working document, states that Bosnia and Herzegovina is at an early stage of preparation on education and culture. There was no progress in this area. The Commission's recommendations from last year were not implemented and therefore remain valid. In the coming year, Bosnia and Herzegovina should in particular:

→ extend and update the action plan for the national qualifications framework (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 studies⁷ and implement findings to improve PISA results. The European Commission Assessment of the Economic Reform Programme for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023 – 2025⁸ for the area of education foresees that Bosnia and Herzegovina still faces challenges in both education and the labor market. Education quality is low, with students scoring below the OECD average in subjects like math, reading, and science. Although early school leaving is relatively low at 4.7%, many people lack the necessary skills for the job market. Participation in early childhood education is also very low, with only 7.3% of children under three enrolled, mostly from urban families. There is a large gap in education and employment opportunities between urban and rural areas. Many young people, especially women, are not in education, employment, or training. These issues are compounded by a mismatch between the education system and labor market needs, contributing to high youth unemployment, a large inactive workforce, and ongoing emigration of skilled workers. In recent period, Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted Youth Strategy of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2024-2027⁹. A document is adopted at the federal level, and focused on improving opportunities for youth in education, employment, health, and social inclusion. The strategy includes specific goals and measures aligned with international standards and the needs of young people.

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 – 2022.¹⁰, which reiterates the

⁵ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/albania/national-reforms-vocational-education-and-training-and-adult>

⁶ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/451db011-6779-40ea-b34b-a0eeda451746_en?filename=Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina%20Report%202024.pdf

⁷ Programme for International Student Assessment – PISA, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study – TIMSS, Progress in International Reading Literacy Study – PIRLS, International Computer and Information Literacy Study – ICILS, Teaching and Learning International Survey – TALIS.

⁸ 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

⁹ <https://fmks.gov.ba/strateska-platforma-strategija-za-mlade-federacije-bosne-i-hercegovine-2024-2027/>

¹⁰ https://www.herdata.org/public/STRATESKI_PRAVCI_RAZVOJA_VISOKOG_OBRAZOVANJA.pdf

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 BiH¹¹ 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 SMEQA Project – Strengthening Capacities and Mechanisms for Enhancing the Quality Assurance System in Higher Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina¹² was initiated in 2023, aiming to improve the quality assurance (QA) processes within the higher education sector. Coordinated by the University of Zenica with support from the European Union, the project seeks to establish strategic guidelines and mechanisms for accrediting study programs in line with European standards. The main goal of the SMEQA project is to enhance the capacity of Bosnia and Herzegovina's education system to meet international standards, ensuring that higher education institutions provide quality education that is comparable to European practices. By focusing on strengthening QA systems, the project is a step toward the country's alignment with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

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- 2030¹³, 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 – 2030¹⁴, 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.

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.

Last but not the least, Bosnia and Herzegovina, as part of the European Training Foundation's Torino Process, has been reviewing policies to promote lifelong learning, including continuing vocational education and training (CVET). The focus areas include enhancing the attractiveness and quality of CVET, integrating work-based learning into education systems, and aligning qualifications with EU standards.¹⁵

¹¹ https://www.mcp.gov.ba/attachments/hr_Migrirani_dokumenti/Va%C5%BEni_dokumenti/Va%C5%BEno-Strategije/Prioriteti_za_razvoj_visokog_obrazovanja_u_BiH_za_period_2016-2026,%D1%85.pdf

¹² <https://www.smeqa.ba/>

¹³ <http://www.sluzbenilist.ba/page/akt/RSjNohz4nh78h77BrEHKw=>

¹⁴ <https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/node/168218>

¹⁵ https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-03/ETF%20LLL%20Policy%20Review%20BiH_EN.pdf

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. Focus is also on the energy renovation of schools to reduce costs and increase energy efficiency. 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 continued to be developed 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.

Pursuant to the 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. Modular teaching is planned for vocational schools starting in the 2024/2025 school year. This approach will replace traditional subjects with modules that align learning outcomes and encourage collaboration between teachers.

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 September 2024, the Regulation on Amendments to the Regulation on the Organization and Implementation of Teaching in Vocational Schools¹⁶ came into force. These amendments provide more detailed provisions on the implementation of vocational practice and introduce new templates for work-based learning agreements.

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.

When it comes to general education, in 2023, the pilot project "Full-Day School" was launched in 62 primary schools with the goal of improving primary education by extending student time in school and integrating various activities. The full implementation of the project is planned for the 2027/2028 school year.

The recent updates in adult education in Croatia include the launch of an adult education voucher system that began in April 2024¹⁷. The programme is designed to support both unemployed and employed individuals, offering vouchers valued at approximately €1,300 for skills training in sectors such as green technologies and digital skills. The goal is to meet the EU target of 10.8% adult education participation by 2030. The Croatian government has allocated around €40 million from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan for this programme, which will run for four years and involve more than 600 educational institutions.

Additionally, it is important to mention ESF+ 2021–2027 programme¹⁸, which aims to provide flexible upskilling and reskilling opportunities, especially in digital skills. This initiative is part of a broader effort to support career transitions and mobility in the workforce. In addition, Croatia's Ministry of Labor and Pension System has highlighted upskilling and reskilling as essential elements of its strategy to enhance employability and economic stability.

Several projects are in motion, such as the "Upskills Pathway" project (2022–2025)¹⁹, which engages low-qualified workers, especially those employed in sectors like logistics and retail, with innovative solutions like VR and gamification. These projects aim to increase the number of upskilling activities, with outcomes including tailored career plans and mentoring programmes.

Despite these efforts, Croatia faces challenges in reaching certain demographic groups, especially older adults and those who are inactive in the labor market. According to recent data, up to 34.7% of the adult population is considered at risk for low skills, with a particular need for improvement in digital literacy²⁰.

Moldova

European Commission Republic of Moldova Country Report 2023²¹ states that Moldova is between having some level of preparation and a moderate level of preparation in the area of education and culture. Good progress was made during the reporting period as the authorities are stepping up the relevance, quality and inclusiveness of education. The creation of the National Institute for Educational leadership began the process of redesigning

¹⁶ https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2024_08_100_1763.html

¹⁷ <https://total-croatia-news.com/news/adult-education-vouchers-to-be-given-as-of-1-april/>

¹⁸ https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/croatia_country_factsheet.pdf

¹⁹ https://epuo.acs.si/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Upskilling_and_reskilling_pathways_in_Croatia_-_Luka_Novosel.pdf

²⁰ https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/croatia_country_factsheet.pdf

²¹ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/858717b3-f8ef-4514-89fe-54a6aa15ef69_en?filename=Moldova%20Report%202024.pdf

professional development for teachers. The development of cultural policies is also advancing, but the cultural sector generally suffers from limited capacity. The Commission's recommendations from last year were largely implemented. In the coming year, Moldova should, in particular:

→ start reforms to consolidate the quality and efficiency of the school network in both general and vocational education, building upon the 'model schools' pilot launched in the 2023/2024 academic year.

→ advance the reform of the continuous professional development of teachers and school leaders, which was initiated when the National Institute for Educational Leadership was set up in 2023.

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“²²

Promoting Quality Education and Lifelong Learning Opportunities for All (2024-2027)²³ is a new programme funded by the EU and implemented by UNICEF and UNDP in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, this programme focuses on enhancing curricula, teacher professional development, and infrastructure improvements for modern, inclusive education.

The Education 2030 Development Strategy²⁴, adopted in 2023, highlights the importance of aligning vocational education and training (VET) with labor market needs. Key priorities include modernizing VET curricula, promoting dual education models, and integrating digital skills to better prepare students for employment. Specific measures include:

- Developing frameworks to ensure students acquire practical and industry-relevant skills.
- Strengthening collaboration between education providers and employers to design curricula and offer work-based learning opportunities.
- Improving access to VET for disadvantaged groups, including individuals with disabilities, to foster inclusivity.
- Creating pathways for upskilling and reskilling, focusing on sectors vital to Moldova's economic development.

The Education 2030 Strategy for Moldova also addresses higher education as part of its broader education reform. It emphasizes the alignment of higher education with labour market needs and the integration of digital skills. The strategy outlines the importance of modernizing curricula, enhancing research capabilities, and

²² <https://cancelaria.gov.md/en/content/national-development-strategy-moldova-2030-parliament>

²³ <https://www.unicef.org/moldova/en/documents/promoting-quality-education-and-lifelong-learning-opportunities-all>

²⁴ <https://gov.md/en/content/moldovan-government-approves-education-2030-development-strategy>

strengthening collaboration between universities and the private sector. Additionally, it highlights the need for reforms to improve quality assurance in higher education, making it more inclusive and accessible.

Montenegro

Montenegro 2024 Report²⁵ by the European Commission states the following:

„Montenegro has a good level of preparation in this area. Some progress was made, notably on advancing preparations for the sectoral reform strategy and implementing the strategy on early and preschool education. The recommendation related to evaluation mechanisms for practical learning remains to be addressed. In the coming year, Montenegro should in particular:

- adopt a high-quality, comprehensive and costed education sector strategy with clear and realistic targets based on evidence; and a solid financial framework for its sustained implementation;
- put in place mechanisms to evaluate practical learning at VET and higher education levels and to ensure increased work-based learning with employers.
- ensure full implementation, funding and monitoring of the new Youth Strategy 2023- 2027

The European Commission Assessment of the Economic Reform Programme 2022- 2024²⁶ still recognizes a mismatch between the skills acquired through education and the needs of the labor market, particularly in areas such as STEM and medicine. The quality of the education system, especially in vocational and higher education, has been a long-standing issue. High youth unemployment and low labor market activity, especially among women and low-skilled individuals, remain key problems. Although the National Employment Strategy (2021- 2025)²⁷ has been adopted, further reforms in the education system are needed to bridge the gap between education and employment, with a stronger focus on developing digital skills and the overall digitalization of education. Recently, several strategic documents have been adopted in Montenegro in the field of education, including the following:

1. Strategy for the Development of Higher Education (2024-2027)²⁸: This document aims to improve the quality of higher education in Montenegro by aligning with European standards and the Bologna Process. Key points of the strategy include:
 - Enhancing the academic and research capacities of higher education institutions.
 - Improving the quality of teaching and learning.
 - Strengthening the employability of graduates by aligning education with labor market needs.
 - Promoting lifelong learning and improving the integration of innovation in education. The strategy also emphasizes regional cooperation and adherence to EU guidelines.
2. National Employment Strategy (2021-2025)²⁹: As stated earlier in the document, this strategy focuses on improving the labor market and addressing skill mismatches, with an emphasis on the education system. Key points include:
 - Increasing employment rates through skills development and better matching of educational outcomes with market needs.

²⁵ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a41cf419-5473-4659-a3f3-af4bc8ed243b_en?filename=Montenegro%20Report%202024.pdf

²⁶ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/897fddc8-399b-4bb8-bcfd-36f6c013b785_enf

²⁷ <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/cc228dd3-f17b-47ce-ac2d-3b230ebcf2a6>

²⁸ <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/6c5f22d1-e3b5-4846-a88d-46fdbf92fb88>

²⁹ <https://www.gov.me/en/documents/cc228dd3-f17b-47ce-ac2d-3b230ebcf2a6>

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- Strengthening active labor market policies to tackle unemployment, especially among vulnerable groups like youth, women, and low-skilled workers.
 - Promoting lifelong learning and upskilling programs to reduce skill gaps, particularly in digital and green sectors.
 - Encouraging regional development by tailoring measures to local employment needs. Read the document here.
3. Youth Strategy 2023-2027³⁰: This strategy focuses on the development of youth, addressing issues of education, employment, and social inclusion. Key points include:
- Improving the quality and accessibility of education and training for young people.
 - Promoting youth employment through targeted initiatives and active labor market measures.
 - Fostering social inclusion by supporting marginalized groups, particularly NEETs (Not in Employment, Education, or Training).

North Macedonia

North Macedonia 2024 Report³¹ states:

„North Macedonia is moderately prepared in the area of education and culture. Limited progress was made. Work on the 2018-2025 education strategy and on developing a proper monitoring system continued to be slow. The adoption of key legislation such as the Law on secondary education, the Law on adult education and the Law on vocational education and training (VET) was delayed. The Commission’s recommendations from last year were only partially implemented and therefore remain largely valid. In the coming year, North Macedonia should in particular:

→ adopt the Laws on secondary education, on adult education and on VET, as well as the 16 related implementing legislation, and continue to set up and operationalise the regional VET centres;

→ improve access to quality education for all, in particular for children with disabilities and children from Roma communities; further develop teachers’ skills and invest in their continuous professional development;

→ optimise the school network; adopt and apply the new formulas for financing primary education; complete and apply similar formulas for secondary, VET and higher education.“ The Assessment of Economic Reform Programme 2024- 2026³² recognizes that the education system in North Macedonia struggles to equip young people with the skills required for labor market participation, contributing to high youth unemployment and low productivity growth. Despite an increase in higher education graduates, curricula remain misaligned with labor market needs. Public spending on education is below 4% of GDP, significantly lower than the EU average, and outdated funding formulas for municipalities hinder effective resource allocation. Lifelong learning participation is critically low at 2.6%, compared to the EU average of 10.8%.

Recent legislative reforms include the adoption of the Law on Vocational Education and Training (VET), the Law on Secondary Education, and the Law on Adult Education, which aim to address structural shortcomings.

³⁰ <https://www.gov.me/en/article/cabinet-adopts-youth-strategy-for-2023-2027>

³¹ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/5f0c9185-ce46-46fc-bf44-82318ab47e88_en?filename=North%20Macedonia%20Report%202024.pdf

³² https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/f0d0a945-18a0-4332-ada3-b3a992be1333_en?filename=ip288_en.pdf

However, progress in establishing regional VET centers, as envisioned by the new VET law, has been slow. Implementation of the 2018-2025 Education Strategy remains incomplete, with an annual progress report and funding formula recommendations still unpublished. These challenges are compounded by labor market structural issues such as low participation rates, high emigration, and skills mismatches, all of which require stronger reforms and better coordination to align education outcomes with labor market demands.

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 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.

According to the Policy Brief "Inclusive Education in North Macedonia: For Every Child, a Fair Chance to Fulfill Their Potential"³³, " significant efforts have been made to improve inclusive education, particularly for children with disabilities. However, challenges persist, including insufficient teacher training, lack of proper infrastructure,

and limited support systems. The country has been working on better collaboration with resource centers and introducing functional assessments to more effectively support children with disabilities.

The National Youth Strategy (2023-2027)³⁴ addresses various aspects of youth development, including education, employment, and quality of life. The strategy highlights the need for an inclusive approach to tackle educational inequalities and improve access for marginalized groups. Additionally, enhancing the quality of education and training for young people, particularly focusing on vocational education and skills development, is a major goal. This involves collaboration with various stakeholders, including schools, universities, and employers, to ensure that young people acquire the skills needed in a rapidly changing job market.

Serbia

The new Strategy for Education Development in Serbia 2030 with the accompanying Action Plan (2021-2023)³⁵ was adopted in June 2021. A new Action Plan covering the period from 2023-2026³⁶ was adopted by the government in October 2023. This plan sets updated priorities and goals in response to the evolving needs of the educational system, particularly in terms of digitalization, vocational training, and lifelong learning.

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 third report covering the year 2023 was expected to be finalized in the first quarter of 2024, in accordance with the deadlines set by the Law on the Planning System. However, as of now, this report has not yet been published on the Ministry of Education's official website.

Serbia has also adopted the Medium-Term Plan of the Ministry of Education for the period from 2024 to 2026 to implement the Strategy for the Development of Education and Upbringing in the Republic of Serbia until 2030. This plan focuses on specific activities and measures aimed at achieving the objectives of the Strategy by 2030. It includes key initiatives such as improving education quality, introducing digitalization, modernizing curricula, training teachers, and promoting lifelong learning.

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..

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 2024³⁷ states:

Serbia has a good level of preparation in education and culture. Limited progress was made, in particular by further consolidating the national qualifications framework (NQF) system and taking further steps to ensure

³⁴ <https://api.ams.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/nsm23-27-sluzhben-vesnik.pdf>

³⁵ https://prosveta.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/1-SROVRS-2030_MASTER_0402_V1.pdf

³⁶ <https://prosveta.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Akcioni-plan-za-period-od-2023.-do-2026.-godine.pdf>

³⁷ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf

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 adopting a new action plan for the education strategy. The Commission's recommendations from last year were partially implemented and remain largely valid. In the coming year, Serbia should in particular:

- increase the number of children participating in early childhood education and care, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- continue with the operationalisation of the NQF system, focusing more on the quality and scope of non-formal education and higher education;
- ensure that the policy and institutional framework for quality assurance in higher education fully complies with the ENQA recommendations.

The European Commission assessment of the ERP for Serbia³⁸ identifies that Serbia's education system faces several challenges, including a mismatch between educational outcomes and labor market needs, low levels of digital literacy, and insufficient alignment of training programs with industry demands. While there has been progress in digital transformation, Serbia still lags behind the EU in digital skills, which affects employability. Despite previous reforms, the quality of education remains weak, particularly in mathematics, reading, and science, where Serbian students scored below the OECD average in the 2022 PISA tests. The country also faces challenges related to brain drain and high long-term unemployment, which further hampers economic development. To address these issues, Serbia aims to improve its education and training systems, focusing on upskilling, reskilling, and better integration of digital skills. However, significant structural reforms are still needed to align education more closely with labor market requirements and EU standards

³⁸ https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/f0d0a945-18a0-4332-ada3-b3a992be1333_en?filename=ip288_en.pdf
