

Education Reform Initiative
of South Eastern Europe
ERI SEE



WORK PROGRAMME
2026

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I INTRODUCTION

1.1 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.

1.1.1 ERI SEE Founding documents

For ERI SEE, four 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.

1.1.2 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 2026 remain the same as in previous period.

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These mission and vision 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;
- d. To actively promote regional cooperation between the education and research sector through exchange of information and experiences as well as cooperation within the Regional Cooperation Council priority area of Building Human Capital;
- e. To address more global developments in education and training, for example the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

II ERI SEE GOVERNANCE

2.1 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 appointed a new ERI SEE Secretariat Director, upon 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.

ERI SEE Secretariat 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.

The new ERI SEE Secretariat Director, Ms Sandra Brkanović, took over the executive managing role over the ERI SEE Secretariat as of 1st November 2025 after the 9.5 years of mandate of Ms Tina Šarić. The transition was accompanied with an extensive hand-over process to ensure smooth transfer of roles and activities.

In 2026 the Governing Board is planned to meet twice. The topics for consideration of the Governing Board in 2026 will include the adoption of the Annual Work Programme for 2026, adoption of the Annual Report on the implementation of the Annual Work Programme for 2025, adopting the Annual Financial Report for 2025 and the accompanying Audit Report, as well as Annual Financial Plan for 2026.

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.

2.2 Strategic Development

Highlights

In 2026, 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)*
- *after successful completion of the EQET SEE, RESET and REconomy projects, start negotiating and developing new ones*
- *strive to support policy consultations at regional level*
- *strive to establish stronger connections with the EU Commission and international partners*
- *ensure the alignment of activities with the European policies and support to the European processes*

a. Support to thematically-based networks

In 2026, the ERI SEE and its Secretariat plan to maintain its strong position established in the field of education and training in the South Eastern European region. ERI SEE will continue supporting its 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 Western Balkans Alliance for Work-based Learning: the alliance of VET centres and chambers of commerce
- 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

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 2026, in formats listed above, specifically focusing on project development, which will be described in more details in the following chapters.

In 2026, and in following years, ERI SEE Secretariat will strive to strengthen its position in other important areas, not neglecting the relationships with the partners and networks mentioned above. Namely, the important areas of further strategic development for ERI SEE include:

b. Financial sustainability of the ERI SEE and Project development

As 3 regional projects closed in 2025, 2026 will be a year of developing of new projects. It will be important to ensure stable financial inflow that will ensure continuous organization of regional activities, combining regional networks, as well as the stable operational functioning of the Secretariat.

The ERI SEE Secretariat plans more extensive cooperation with the Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalization (OeAD) in the period approx. from 2026 – 2028 through Austrian Development Agency funded project VET2Work. ERI SEE would participate in the OeAD-led project as a strategic partner, contributing its expertise particularly in the areas of skills needs analysis and the development of regionally based occupational and qualification standards.

At the same time, ERI SEE presented a project idea to Austrian Development Agency, with the working title Skills for Quality, Innovative and Lifelong Learning VET in South Eastern Europe (SQILL-UP VET), focusing on 3 aspects of VET – its provision, providers and beneficiaries, and offering improvements in all of them, through new regionally-based occupational and qualification standards, internal evaluation processes and recognition of prior learning and career guidance services. The further development of new project/projects proposal/proposals will be continued throughout 2026, after which the ADA decision on funding will be made.

In addition, ERI SEE, in cooperation with GIZ and as a part of the RESET project finished in 2025, developed a project idea focusing on the digitalization of teaching and learning materials. The further development of new project proposal will be continued throughout 2026. The project will be discussed for funding by the donors identified by ERI SEE in 2026.

However, it is also important to secure the continuous funding (through annual contributions from member country, and donations) to ensure the stability of the ERI SEE Secretariat during periods when new projects are being contracted, or in between projects. An increase in the annual contributions of member countries will be planned for a three-year period, in line with the decision of the Governing Board. Communication line between the ERI SEE Secretariat, Governing Board representatives, donor institutions and other partners will be maintained to consider funding opportunities, which will remain a key.

c. Strengthening cooperation with the decision-making bodies

When talking about the policy making process and involvement in policy consultations, ERI SEE orientation in 2026 will be on building stronger relationships with the ministries in charge of education and providing expertise in decision-making and policy-shaping processes. In doing so, the ERI SEE shall pay particular attention to the balanced approach among the ERI SEE economies, where ERI SEE, as a regionally owned organization, should be present in an equal manner and scope. The strategic strengthening of the ERI SEE in terms of supporting decision-making and policy-shaping should be continuous and step-by-step process. A particularly important role in this process can be played by the ERI SEE Governing Board who can act as liaison between the ERI SEE Secretariat and ministries' hierarchies. The good example of this process is the support of the North Macedonian ERI SEE Governing Board representatives, who arranged for the meeting between the ERI SEE Secretariat representatives-the former and new Director – with the Minister of Education, where further cooperation between ERI SEE and Ministry were discussed, particularly in areas of potential future regional skills competitions.

ERI SEE remains open to the possibility of organizing high-level conferences on topics of joint interest, in cooperation with the ministries of education. A good example of such cooperation is the Ministerial conference held in Skopje in 2023, on the topic of quality and quality assurance of higher education.

d. 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 2026, include establishing connection with the European Delegation offices across the region, and identifying areas of common interest. Furthermore, the mechanism of the Multi-beneficiary Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance will be explored by the ERI SEE. However, in exploring these activities, it must be fully understood that the Multi-beneficiary 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 2026, it is planned to continue 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.

e. Cooperation with regional and international partners

ERI SEE values its connections and cooperation with international partners and in international community.

Cooperation with the OeAD has been thus far formalised yearly through the Cooperation Agreement that specified cooperation priority areas roles and obligations of both parties, and the OeAD financial contribution for the realisation of specified roles.

With the agreed Common Regional Market Action Plan (MAP REA) and identified relevant areas in the sectors of higher education and VET, the work of RCC and ERI SEE will also continue, among other, through the work of the Joint ERI SEE- RCC Working Group for Recognition of Academic Qualifications and Quality Assurance. Regional activities for 2026 in which the ERI SEE is identified as the supporting organisation by the MAP REA are as follows:

Priority Area	Regional Actions	Lead Organisation	Supporting Organisation	Timeframe	Expected results
4.1 Human Capital Development	4.1.1. Facilitate the WB6 access to higher education and admission to study at EU HEI	RCC	EC, ERI SEE	2026-2028	Access to higher education and admission to study for the people of the WB6 to the EU public HEI facilitated.
	4.1.2. Facilitate the recognition of WB6 academic qualifications in EU	RCC	EC, ERI SEE	2026-2028	- Simplified and accelerated recognition of WB6 academic qualifications at EU level; - Supported EU harmonisation (Professional Qualifications Directive) and implementation of EU Growth Plan.
	4.1.3. Explore the extension of the recognition of academic qualifications of private higher education institution in the Western Balkans	RCC	ERI SEE	2026-2028	- Prepared assessment for potential extension of the recognition of academic qualifications to the private higher education institutions in the WB6; - Enabled expansion of the Regional Recognition Database (RRD) to include the private HEI.
	4.1.6. Support WB6 Quality Assurance Agencies in developing a digital platform for conducting evaluation procedures	RCC	ERI SEE	2026-2028	WB6 QA agencies equipped with digital platforms to increase their effectiveness of conducting the evaluation procedures.
	4.1.7. Support WB6 employers to align their systematisations with all higher education levels of the National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs)	WB6 CIF	RCC, ERI SEE	2026-2028	Facilitated alignment of WB6 employers' systematisations with NQFs; - Joint regional Declaration for encouragement of all employers' to align their HR recruiting process with the domestic NQFs.
4.2. Close the skills gap	4.2.2. Support the alignment of WB6 VET policies with labour market in the Western Balkans	WB6 CIF	RCC, ERI SEE, ETF	2026-2028	Declaration for VET education adopted; - Exchange mechanism between the WB6 educational authorities established - the RRD functionality expanded; - Quality assurance initiatives at the regional level through EQAVET further developed; - Simplified procedures and methodology established for the development and inclusion of qualifications/ occupational standards from various learning settings in the Digital National Qualification Framework (NQF) Register.

Priority Area	Regional Actions	Lead Organisation	Supporting Organisation	Timeframe	Expected results
4.2. Close the skills gap	4.2.3. Create common regional basis for occupational standards for certain VET curricula	WB6 CIF	RCC, ERI SEE	2026-2028	At least one common regional basis for occupational standard per year created; - At least one awareness campaign organised for the region's business community regarding the benefits and the need for harmonised VET education programmes.
	4.2.4. Improve framework for the development of dual education in the WB6	WB6 CIF	RCC, ERI SEE, ETF	2025-2028	Increased number of educational institutions and end users in dual educational programmes; - Increased number of companies in dual education programmes.
	4.2.7. Facilitate regional STEM education approach	RCC	ERI SEE, ETF	2025-2028	Harmonised regional STEM education policies /guidelines at all levels of education developed; - Facilitated collaboration amongst educational institutions, industry partners, and relevant stakeholders to develop standardised STEM curricula that align with regional needs and global standards; - Established partnerships between educational institutions and industry to explore possibilities for providing practical experience for STEM students.
5.8. Regional Tourism Policies and Competitiveness	5.8.4. Establish a Blueprint for Educational and Vocational Skills Reform in WB6 Tourism	RCC	WB6 CIF, ERI SEE, ETF	2026	A regionally supported framework for high school and university curriculum with incorporated green, digital, and other modern skills needed for tourism professionals and experts developed and adopted.

The Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2021 between the Western Balkans 6 Chambers Investment Forum and the ERI SEE, defined the cooperation focus between two initiatives and their intention to cooperate in regional activities (including but not limited to the development of regional occupational and qualification standards, peer learning, knowledge exchanges, seminars, conferences, projects etc.). This cooperation was operationalised thus far through the cooperation in the TO REGOS and the EQET SEE projects.

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

The exchange of information between ERI SEE and other internationally funded projects and bodies in the region such as the regional EU Delegations, OeAD, ETF, Regional Challenge Fund- RCF, Austrian Development Agency- ADA, GIZ, The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation- SDC and other will be continued.

ERI SEE will also explore cooperation with other partners and donors, through other projects and activities, such as with the International Labour Organization or Climate partnership for Western Balkans, WorldSkills Europe, World Skills International etc.

f. Alignment with the European policies and support to the European processes

The ERI SEE will continue to support relevant European processes through its activities including the Bologna Process (2019)¹, the Copenhagen process (2022)², the Torino Process³ and the Berlin Process⁴, respectful of the national commitments undertaken by its member countries within these frameworks.

The ERI SEE will remain aligned with European strategic orientations and policy frameworks, ensuring that its activities are consistent with: (a) *overarching European strategies, notably with the EU Strategy for Western Balkans (2018)⁵, the European Green Deal (2019)⁶, the Gender Equality Strategy (2020)⁷, A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions (2020)⁸, the Council Recommendation on VET for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness, and Resilience (2020)⁹, the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (2020)¹⁰ and (b) key European education declarations and strategies including the Bologna Declaration (2019)¹¹, the European Skills Agenda (2020)¹², the Osnabrück Declaration (2020)¹³, the GreenComp: the European framework for sustainability competences (2022)¹⁴ and the Herning Declaration (2025)¹⁵.*

¹<https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/bologna-process>

² https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_04_293

³ <https://www.torinoprocess.eu/>

⁴ <https://www.berlinprocess.de/>

⁵ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0065>

⁶ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en

⁷ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0152>

⁸ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0014>

⁹ https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/celex_32020h120201_en_txt.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.rcc.int/files/user/docs/196c92cf0534f629d43c460079809b20.pdf>

¹¹ https://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/1999_Bologna_Declaration_English_553028.pdf

¹² https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/european-skills-agenda_en

¹³ https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/osnabrueck_declaration_eu2020.pdf

¹⁴ <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC128040>

¹⁵ <https://danish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/media/23xla4rt/herning-declaration-2025-english.pdf>

III THEMATIC ORIENTATION AND ACTIVITIES

3.1 Thematic areas of interest

Highlights

In 2026, along with the already well-established thematic areas (modernization of VET and cooperation with the business sector for greater labour market relevance, career guidance, promotion of excellence in VET etc. ; quality assurance of schools through capacity building in external and internal evaluation; quality assurance in higher education through integration of); and teacher education and training in the area of digitalization and green transition), new themes will be explored: 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 2026 through project concept notes and regional meetings.

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

- the analysis of the existing strategic documents at national (Education and training strategies, National action plans, Economic Reform Programmes, Recommendations by the European Commission etc.), regional and the European levels.
- 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 2026, 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 digitalization, green transition, enhancing cooperation with the business sector increasing the relevance of VET (with the emphasis on the promotion of excellence in VET) and addressing the skills mismatch, contributing to the strengthening of the work-based learning and supporting the social dimension of education (with additional focus on supporting and developing the career guidance mechanisms).
- Quality assurance in pre-tertiary education and training, with the focus on external and internal 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, green transition etc.

The new thematic areas, recognized by ERI SEE regional partners and strategic developments, include:

- Adult education and lifelong learning, focusing on the re-skilling and up-skilling programmes (particularly in the areas relevant for the green transition) and recognition of prior learning (RPL), or validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL),

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 2026 is expected around the planning of future cooperation (via developing new regional projects) that would continue with the ERI SEE expertise in the regional occupational and qualification standard development, and teaching and learning materials development; This planning involves consultations with international partners, VET agencies, qualification agencies, chambers of commerce, and agencies for quality assurance in pre-tertiary education on the identification of specific topics, actions and desired results that would support national reform processes.

The general focus of the future ERI SEE Secretariat proposed project activities would support the regional component of the ERI SEE network through

1. Supporting the VET sector and its cooperation with the business sector: ERI SEE will (through, among others, the OeAD VET2Work project), continue working in its areas of expertise that include regionally based occupational and qualification standards in regionally agreed sectors.
2. Supporting teaching and learning processes in initial and continuous VET: development of curricula, teaching, learning and work-based learning material and trainings for teachers, in digital formats, with adjustments of the results to the needs of the adult education.
3. Supporting the quality assurance of the pre-tertiary education: development of a support scheme in the implementation of external and internal 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.

3.2 Activities and partners

Highlights

In 2026, the ERI SEE Secretariat will initiate development and negotiations for two projects as a lead partner (Skills for Quality, Innovative and Lifelong Learning VET in SEE – SQILL-UP SEE, and green transition: Teaching and Learning Materials and digitalization). In addition, ERI SEE will participate as a strategic partner in the OeAD-led VET2Work project.

In 2026, 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 (OeAD), Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), European Training Foundation (ETF), Western Balkan 6 Chamber Investment Forum (WB6& CIF), Regional Challenge Fund (RCF), GIZ (German Corporation for International Cooperation), SICI and others. ERI SEE will initiate cooperation with other potential partners such as ILO and Climate.

This cooperation will materialize in the form of project consultations and project planning (for SQILL-UP SEE and Green transition projects), and project activity participation (OeAD run project VET2Work).

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.

A Proposed project activities involving the participation of regional and international partners, are described in the following sub-chapters. In addition to the below mentioned project activities, the ERI SEE Secretariat will continue working on mapping potential donors and developing project proposals within the scope of the ERI SEE thematic areas.

3.2.1 Skills for Quality, Innovative and Lifelong Learning VET in South Eastern Europe project (SQILL-UP VET)

A project concept note proposes tackling the complex and interrelated socio-economic challenges, including high youth unemployment, skills mismatch, demographic shifts, labour market volatility, and the challenges related to climate change in SEE. In this context, vocational education and training plays a crucial role in strengthening the resilience, inclusiveness, labour-responsiveness and future-readiness of societies.

A comprehensive, regionally coordinated approach to strengthen the education systems in the Western Balkans and Moldova is articulated through **three specific objectives (SO)**:

SO1: Improving the VET provision in the Western Balkans through the development/update of occupational standards, qualification standards, curricula and adult education programmes (with focus on green and digital skills) to address the skills mismatch, regional mobility of labour force, societal and labour market needs.

SO2: Improving the internal evaluation processes and quality assurance indicators for the increase of the quality culture and quality management of VET providers

SO3: Developing the recognition of prior learning and improving career guidance services for greater lifelong learning and employability prospects of VET beneficiaries

The direct target groups listed in the project concept note are ministries of education, VET, qualification and quality assurance agencies, chambers of commerce, employers' unions, **career guidance centres, VET and adult education providers, teachers in VET schools and adult education institutions**, , education, quality assurance, business experts and **external evaluators**.

3.2.2 Modernization of teaching and learning materials related to the green transition

Building on the successfully closed project RESET (Renewable Energy Services in Education and Training), through which the handbooks were developed:

- Teachers' Manual for installation and maintenance of solar photovoltaic systems
- Students' Manual for installation and maintenance of solar photovoltaic systems
- Teachers' Manual for installation and maintenance of electrical energy equipment in wind turbines
- Students' Manual for installation and maintenance of electrical energy equipment in wind turbines

a new project proposal will be further developed in 2026. It will aim at introducing immersive digital learning tools into vocational training. By developing a virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) training platform, the project idea tends to provide students with safe, realistic, and scalable opportunities to practice complex tasks. Through these simulations, learners would be able to gain hands-on experience with equipment and scenarios that would otherwise be costly, unsafe, or unavailable in school settings. In doing so, the project idea seeks to modernize VET, bridge the skills gap in the renewable energy sector, and support wider sustainable development and EU integration goals.

The project concept note generally focuses on:

- Digitalising existing manuals developed within the RESET project:
 - Teachers' Manual for installation and maintenance of solar photovoltaic systems
 - Students' Manual for installation and maintenance of solar photovoltaic systems
 - Teachers' Manual for installation and maintenance of electrical energy equipment in wind turbines
 - Students' Manual for installation and maintenance of electrical energy equipment in wind turbines
- developing teaching and learning material (TLM) aimed at supporting the green transition,
- supporting the digitisation of teaching and learning by developing regional digital training platform and acquiring VR and AR equipment.

Through 2026 the project will be presented to different international donors, organizations and programmes for potential funding, including GIZ, SDC and Western Balkans Climate Partnership. The specific focus and the list of activities will be contingent upon the project length and available funding.

3.2.3 VET2Work (lead by OeAD)

In 2025 consultations with Austrian Agency for Education and Internationalization (OeAD) were being held, to consider the ERI SEE Secretariat's involvement in the project planned by OeAD and submitted to ADA.

The project's objective is to enhance labour market relevance, attractiveness, inclusiveness and sustainability of VET with a strong focus on dual oriented VET provision in the tourism and hospitality sector, aligned with the agricultural sector in Albania, Kosovo*, Montenegro and North Macedonia.

The purpose of the project is to reduce the mismatch between the education system and skills required on the labour market in the tourism and agriculture business, as well as to increase the attractiveness of VET and its accessibility for vulnerable groups – especially girls – and rural areas in VET.

The project is composed of several components and corresponding work packages. ERI SEE Secretariat would be involved in:

- conducting the detailed needs assessment of the occupational standards and curricula in the agricultural and tourism and hospitality sectors
- developing new or revising existing occupational and qualification standards and curricula, in line with the results of the needs assessment,
- analysing of the content of national curricula in the agricultural and tourism and hospitality sectors

The project is expected to start approximately in the third quarter of 2026, and apart from the components mentioned above, it will also include the policy dialogue component, with a strong focus on dual oriented VET development; providing adequate equipment for schools, fostering school – business cooperation in tourism/hospitality sector and promoting inclusive access to VET provision, namely in tourism/hospitality and agriculture sector.

IV ERI SEE SECRETARIAT

4.1 Human resources

Highlights

The ERI SEE Secretariat will tackle 2026 activities with existing human resources, focusing on work continuity, strengthening the institutional capacities and supporting the professional development of employees in alignment with the strategic and thematic organisational priorities.

In 2026, ERI SEE Secretariat begins a new governance cycle and the start of the first full mandate of the new Director of the Secretariat, Ms Sandra Brkanović, taking the position of the Director of the ERI SEE Secretariat on 1st November 2025.

The ERI SEE Secretariat will continue its activities with the staff equalling to 3.3 FTE (Director, 1 FTE, 2 Project Coordinators, 2 FTEs and Accountant, 0.3 FTE). The future employments will depend 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.

In 2026 additional attention will be paid to the further development of the institutional capacities of the ERI SEE Secretariat. This includes enhancing the professional competencies of staff, strengthening internal procedures and processes, as well as developing capacities for the preparation, management, and implementation of projects in line with the requirements of various donor programmes.

4.2 Financial resources

Highlights

Funding for ERI SEE Secretariat in 2026 is focused on maintaining the stability of the Secretariat's regular operations, while at the same time considering opportunities to strengthen long-term financial sustainability by exploring additional funding sources.

In 2026, ERI SEE's funding will be primarily based on the annual contributions of its member countries and the regular donation from the OeAD, complemented by the 2025 remaining funds that had arisen from the externally funded projects completed in 2025. Listed sources will be utilised for the functioning of the Secretariat and the implementation of ERI SEE's regular activities.

In 2026, the ERI SEE Secretariat will focus its attention on exploring additional financial sources including but not limited to negotiating the funding of the new programme and project activities and submitting newly developed project proposals contingent upon the availability of donor funds at the regional and the European level.

The negotiations regarding the participation of the ERI SEE within the OeAD coordinated VET2Work project will continue, with expectation for the ERI SEE Secretariat budget to be increased for involvement in the project.

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 portal¹⁶.

Albania

The European Commission recommendation within the Country Report Albania 2025¹⁷, within the Chapter 26 Education and Culture, states:

Albania is between a moderate and good level of preparation in the field of education. 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:

- further optimise the VET system in line with labour market needs;
- further improve the professional development and training of teachers and trainers, with a focus on (i) pedagogical skills to implement the competence-based inclusive approach and (ii) digitalisation from pre-primary to university levels, including VET education;

The European Commission assessment of the ERP for Albania¹⁸ identifies challenges in education, skills, and the labour market. Despite positive labour market trends with rising employment and lower unemployment, structural issues remain high rates of early school leaving, low digital literacy, and a large share of low-skilled adults. The education system is marked by outdated curricula, insufficient teacher training, weak inclusiveness, and limited access to early childhood, vocational, and technical education, especially in rural and disadvantaged areas. Skills mismatches and the lack of effective vocational education and training hinder labour market relevance and contribute to emigration of skilled workers. To address these challenges, Albania's Reform Agenda prioritises human capital development through revising VET content and curricula, establishing new Sector Skills Committees, modernising primary and secondary curricula, training teachers, and enhancing digital skills by equipping schools with ICT tools, integrating digital subjects, and developing certification frameworks for digital competences. In line with the structural challenges highlighted in the ERP regarding education quality, skills mismatch and early school leaving, Albania has introduced several reforms in pre-university education. In 2025, the Ministry of Education and Sports launched the digital notebook, a real-time communication tool accessible through e-Albania and SMIP systems, designed to strengthen cooperation between parents and schools. In the same year, a National Action Plan for the prevention of violence in pre-university education (2025–2027) was adopted, focusing on physical and digital safety, doubling the number of school safety officers, limiting mobile

¹⁶ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/>

¹⁷ https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/fe9138b7-90fe-4277-a12c-3a03f6d1957f_en?filename=albania-report-2025.pdf

¹⁸ https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/95a3fa43-999a-44a6-9090-e432355f28f1_en?filename=ip319_en.pdf

phone use during lessons, expanding psychosocial support services, and reinforcing parental involvement through ethics codes and performance assessments of school leaders.¹⁹

Earlier reforms included the introduction of 320 school quality coordinators and the implementation of the teacher career framework, new ICT measures, and updated teacher guidance (2024). Negotiations on EU Chapter 26 (Education and Training) were opened in 2023, while the new national Strategy on Education was approved in 2022. Together, these measures aim to modernise pre-university education, strengthen inclusiveness and safety, and better align educational outputs with labour market and social needs. In 2025, Albania has also launched or continued several key initiatives to modernise its education and skills system, closely linking it to labour market needs:

- From the school year 2025/26, the number of dual VET schools will grow from 10 to 16, with new programmes in logistics, automotive diagnostics, renewable energy, fashion design and hospitality. This aims to provide more practical, work-based learning opportunities in sectors with strong labour demand.²⁰
- With World Bank support, Albania is establishing 216 *SmartLabs* in schools and 5 *Youth Innovation Centres*, designed to improve digital, STEM and problem-solving skills and prepare students for the digital economy.²¹
- “Choose a Job” campaign is the national campaign encourages more students to enrol in VET instead of general secondary education, aiming to increase the supply of skilled workers aligned with labour market needs.²²
- Still ongoing National Employment and Skills Strategy 2023–2030 provides the overarching framework to link education, VET, and employment policies, focusing on youth, women and vulnerable groups while promoting upskilling and reskilling.²³
- Skills Development for Employment (SD4E) is a programme co-financed by Switzerland, running until 2027, supports Albania in strengthening VET institutions, qualification frameworks, and employment services, with a focus on private sector engagement.²⁴
- The Centre for Information and Recognition of Documents (CIP) continues to work on regional qualifications maps and digitalised recognition procedures to facilitate mobility and labour market access.²⁵

¹⁹ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/euryperia/albania/national-reforms-school-education>

²⁰ <https://rtsh.al/rti/en/albania-expands-dual-vocational-education-with-new-programs/>

²¹ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2025/07/03/transforming-institutions-for-inclusive-services-and-human-development-in-albania>

²² <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/euryperia/albania/national-reforms-vocational-education-and-training-and-adult-learning>

²³ <https://ageing-policies.unece.org/api/public/attachments/view/56e00f58-84d4-448d-b3f2-d42616a972e8>

²⁴ <https://www.eda.admin.ch/countries/albania/en/home/international-cooperation/projects.html>

²⁵ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/euryperia/albania/national-reforms-vocational-education-and-training-and-adult-learning>

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Bosnia and Herzegovina 2025 Report²⁶, European Commission document, states that Bosnia and Herzegovina is at an early stage of preparation on education. There was limited progress in this area during the reporting period. A draft qualifications framework was drawn up in December 2024. The Council of Ministers adopted in December 2024 an action plan for improving quality assurance in education. Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to ensure a fully functional system of accreditation and re-accreditation of higher education institutions and study programmes across the country. Bosnia and Herzegovina did not regularly participate in international assessment studies in the past five years. The Commission's recommendations from last year were partly implemented and therefore remain broadly valid. In the coming year, Bosnia and Herzegovina should in particular:

- develop a national qualifications framework (NQF) referenced to the European qualifications framework;
- implement the action plan to improve quality assurance with a view to joining the European Association for Quality Assurance (ENQA);
- ensure continued participation in international assessment studies, intensifying preparations to join the 2029 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and implement findings to improve PISA results.

The European Commission Assessment of the Economic Reform Programme for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2025²⁷ notes that GDP grew by 2.5% in 2024 and is projected to reach 3.3% by 2027. However, continued labour outflows create shortages and push wages above productivity, while education and training systems do not provide the skills needed on the labour market. Public spending is directed mainly to social transfers, while investment in education, VET, infrastructure, and green and digital transitions remains too low. Weak governance, fragmented competences, and poor coordination further limit reforms, leaving youth unemployment high and skills mismatches unresolved. The Commission stresses the need for a countrywide Reform Agenda that prioritises targeted investment in education and human capital to better align with labour market needs and support competitiveness. In line with the need to strengthen human capital and better align skills with labour market demand, Bosnia and Herzegovina has recently advanced reforms in higher education. In 2025, the Ministry of Civil Affairs prepared a draft Action Plan on the Implementation of Key Obligations of the Bologna Process for 2024–2027, developed with the Quality Assurance Agency, the Rectors' Conference, and the Information Centre for Recognition of Documents. This plan is aimed at improving quality assurance, recognition procedures, and overall compliance with the European Higher Education Area.

In 2024, the Republika Srpska adopted a comprehensive Strategy for the Development of Science, Technology, Higher Education and the Information Society (2023–2029), linking education and research more closely to innovation, digitalisation, employment, and sustainable development objectives. In the same year, the Centre for Information and Recognition of Documents in Higher Education produced several tools — including a regional qualifications map and the European Area of Recognition Handbook — to improve transparency and digitalisation in recognition processes and to facilitate the automatic recognition of qualifications. These measures aim to enhance mobility, comparability of qualifications, and access to the labour market, while contributing to the wider EU integration agenda.²⁸

²⁶https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/5d8fc547-f8f8-456f-84e3-b38998acfafd_en?filename=bosnia-and-herzegovina-report-2025.pdf

²⁷https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/95a3fa43-999a-44a6-9090-e432355f28f1_en?filename=ip319_en.pdf

²⁸ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/bosnia-and-herzegovina/national-reforms-higher-education>

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- 2030²⁹, 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 – 2030³⁰, 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 2025, Bosnia and Herzegovina also moved forward with reforms under the joint EU and Council of Europe *Quality Education for All* programme. These reforms aim to make schools more inclusive and democratic by ensuring equal access for vulnerable groups, embedding human rights and citizenship education into teaching, and strengthening the role of parents and communities in school life. Teacher training has been expanded with new modules on critical thinking, media literacy, and civic competences, helping educators to create safe and participatory learning environments. At the system level, education authorities committed to improving monitoring and evaluation frameworks for school quality and to enhancing cooperation across the country's fragmented governance structures. Together, these measures are intended to raise the overall quality of learning, reduce disparities, and bring BiH's education system closer to European standards.³¹

²⁹ <http://www.sluzbenilist.ba/page/akt/RSjNohz4nh78h77BrEHKw=>

³⁰ <https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/node/168218>

³¹ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/sarajevo/-/education-authorities-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-back-stronger-reforms-for-inclusive-high-quality-learning>

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.

A Register of Diplomas and Diploma Supplements (Digital Diploma Register) has been established. Higher education institutions have continued entering data on diplomas issued from January 1, 1984, to December 31, 2023, into the Digital Diploma Register. Individuals who acquired their qualification after January 1, 2024 obtain a digital diploma which is entered into the Digital Diploma Register.

In order to improve the quality and relevance of study programs in relation to labour market needs, the application of the Croatian Qualifications Framework has continued with the aim of registering qualification standards and sets of learning outcomes at the higher education level in the Register of the Croatian Qualifications Framework.

In the Register of Study Programs maintained by the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth, the number of accredited study programs in foreign languages increased to 148, which also includes an increase in the number of joint studies with foreign higher education institutions. The Ministry has established a legal base for issuing a joint diploma.

Program agreements on four-year financing have been concluded with public universities. Program agreements represent an important step in improving the higher education system and scientific research activities in the Republic of Croatia. Program agreements enable more transparent and efficient financing, which is directed towards the results and quality of research and teaching and linked to national strategic priorities.

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 has been implemented for students in the first year of secondary vocational schools since the 2025/2026 school year. This approach has replaced 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 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.

Since 2022, adult education has been financed through a voucher system for unemployed and employed people, offering vouchers worth approximately €1,300 for 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 programme³², 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.

Through the Upskills Pathways project (2022-2025)³³, final proposals for the Thematic Country Report (TCR) have been developed. 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 labour 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 literacy³⁴.

³² https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/croatia_country_factsheet.pdf

³³ https://epuo.acs.si/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Upskilling_and_reskilling_pathways_in_Croatia_-_Luka_Novosel.pdf

³⁴ https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/croatia_country_factsheet.pdf

Moldova

European Commission Republic of Moldova Country Report 2025³⁵ states that Moldova is moderately prepared in the area of education. Good progress was made during the reporting period as the authorities advanced reforms to enhance the relevance, quality and inclusiveness of education and consolidate the school network both in general education and in vocational education and training (VET). Challenges remain in the implementation of impactful reforms for inclusive education, as well as effective measures to reduce the mismatch between vocational skills and labour market demands. The Commission's recommendations from last year were partially implemented and remain valid. In the coming year, Moldova should, in particular:

- adopt measures to improve efficiency of public spending in education and direct resources towards strengthening the governance of the education system and the overall quality of education, including by implementing robust anti-corruption and antifraud measures in universities;
- advance reforms to enhance quality and relevance of vocational education and training, contributing to reduce the mismatch between skills and labour market demands, by aligning active VET study programmes with qualification-based curricula, improving opportunities in dual VET, and increasing the number of teachers with digital skills, based on the DigiCompEdu framework;
- advance inclusive education reforms to ensure equitable access to quality education for children with special educational needs, disabilities and social or economic vulnerabilities, including children from ethnic minorities.

The Economic Reform Programme 2025³⁶ notes that education expenditure in Moldova is relatively high, at 6.1% of GDP in 2024, above the EU average, but learning outcomes remain below OECD levels according to PISA. Despite ongoing VET reform and measures to promote digital skills, there is a persistent mismatch between the education system and labour market needs. Labour force participation is low, falling to 42.5% at the end of 2024, with an employment rate of 40.9%. Female employment is constrained by limited childcare provision, although recent measures introducing flexible working arrangements and childcare support have shown some positive effect. Informal employment remains widespread, and while the State Labour Inspectorate's reform programme aims to reduce informality from 22.9% in 2021 to 19% by 2026, progress in 2024, though notable, is still insufficient relative to the scale of the informal economy.

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.

³⁵https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/23fa6af0-89b3-4532-a3d9-1638727d14c_en?filename=moldova-report-2025.pdf

³⁶https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/95a3fa43-999a-44a6-9090-e432355f28f1_en?filename=ip319_en.pdf

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“³⁷

Promoting Quality Education and Lifelong Learning Opportunities for All (2024-2027)³⁸ 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 Strategy³⁹, adopted in 2023, highlights the importance of aligning vocational education and training (VET) with labour 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 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.

In 2025, Moldova launched a series of initiatives to strengthen inclusiveness, quality, and labour-market relevance of its education system. From September 2025, the government is providing free meals for students in grades V–IX, expanding social support in schools, while kindergartens are being reinforced with new specialists such as psychologists and speech therapists.⁴⁰ To promote safe learning environments, the Ministry of Education has also initiated a national anti-bullying campaign and is setting up a registry of staff involved in cases of violence and abuse.⁴¹

Inclusiveness remains a central focus. The “Education for All” programme, launched in September 2025, supports 27 schools in nine districts to become more inclusive for children with disabilities, refugee students, and ethnic minorities, through teacher training, mentoring, and awareness activities.⁴² Complementing this, the BOOST initiative, introduced in May 2025, develops inclusive after-school education opportunities to ensure equal participation in learning.⁴³

³⁷ <https://cancelaria.gov.md/en/content/national-development-strategy-moldova-2030-parliament>

³⁸ <https://www.unicef.org/moldova/en/documents/promoting-quality-education-and-lifelong-learning-opportunities-all>

³⁹ <https://gov.md/en/content/moldovan-government-approves-education-2030-development-strategy>

⁴⁰ <https://www.moldpres.md/eng/society/moldova-s-education-and-research-ministry-announces-priorities-for-2025-year?utm>

⁴¹ <https://www.moldpres.md/eng/society/moldova-s-education-and-research-ministry-announces-priorities-for-2025-year>

⁴² <https://www.unicef.org/moldova/en/press-releases/education-all-27-schools-be-supported-becoming-more-inclusive>

⁴³ <https://locallink.childhub.org/en/child-protection-news/boost-launches-moldova-support-inclusive-afterschool-education>

At the same time, Moldova is advancing environmental education as part of its green transition. With EU and UNDP support, pilot modules on climate change, renewable energy, circular economy, and sustainable lifestyles are being integrated into schools, linking education reform to the wider sustainable development agenda.⁴⁴

Higher education reform is also gaining momentum. From the 2025–26 academic year, dual education will be introduced in universities for senior students in fields such as marketing, pedagogy, engineering, and IT. Recent legislative changes simplify accreditation for universities, extend accreditation cycles from five to seven years, and establish a new national online admissions platform (eadmitere.gov.md), allowing applicants to choose multiple universities and programmes more easily.⁴⁵ In addition, the “Study in Moldova” campaign, launched in February 2025, promotes domestic higher education opportunities to discourage academic emigration and improve visibility of Moldovan universities.⁴⁶

⁴⁴<https://www.undp.org/moldova/press-releases/moldova-will-advance-efforts-promoting-environmental-education-schools-support-european-union-and-undp>

⁴⁵ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/moldova/national-reforms-higher-education>

⁴⁶ <https://euroguidance.eu/national-education-promotion-campaign-study-in-moldova>

Montenegro

The European Commission Montenegro 2025 Report⁴⁷ acknowledges the adoption of the Education Reform Strategy 2025-2035 and the Action Plan for 2025-2026, as well as the amendments to the General Law on Education adopted in 2025. According to the 2025 Report, in terms of the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU, the Montenegrin education system *'still faces numerous challenges, which are being gradually addressed by the authorities'* and in coming year *'should in particular: improve the implementation of programmes for dual vocational education and training and post-secondary education in close cooperation with business associations and provide work-based learning'*;

The 2025 Report concludes that the Commission's recommendations from last year for Chapter 26 were partially implemented. Therefore, in the coming year, Montenegro should:

- *'ensure the new Education Reform Strategy (2025-2035) and its action plan 2025-2026 are implemented effectively and in a timely manner by allocating them adequate funding in the 2026 education budget and the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework for 2028.*
- *focus on action plan measures that aim to improve the quality and inclusiveness of education and access to it;*
- *ensure fully implementing, funding and monitoring the new Youth Strategy 2023-2027.'*

The Economic Reform Programmes of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye (European Commission 2025) states that

'a mismatch of skills represents a significant challenge. The quality and relevance of the entire education system and the lack of practical experience of vocational education and training (VET) are long-standing challenges. Reform steps to address labour market mismatches and to increase the employability of higher education graduates are expected to provide for additional upskilling and reskilling. This will include expanding lifelong learning options for adults and creating more opportunities for work-based practical learning with employers, both for VET students and higher education graduates. In addition, the proposed reform of the career guidance and counselling system and related capacity building could provide significant help for graduates to make better informed career choices.' (European Union, 2025⁴⁸)

The structural reform measure No 5: *'Improving the framework for better youth employability and higher quality of education'* have been proposed to tackle the obstacles related to mismatch of skills and the employability of VET graduates by *'facilitating youth access to the labour market while increasing the quality of education. The reform also responds to the challenges in the field of vocational education related to adapting the educational offer to the needs of the labour market, primarily bearing in mind digital transformation and green transition.'* The support is expected to be provided to the *'development of the qualifications that are in demand in the labour market and that include digital technologies and "green" qualifications for green jobs; strengthening the competencies of the staff delivering theoretical and practical instruction so they can respond to the requirements of modern-day teaching, providers and instructors of practical education, and strengthening of the career guidance and counselling services, primarily in primary schools.'*⁴⁹ (Government of Montenegro, 2024).

⁴⁷ https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-report-2025_en

⁴⁸ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/23cdd2f1-40f2-11f0-b9f2-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

⁴⁹ Montenegro Economic Reform Programme 2024-2026, Government of Montenegro 2024, <https://www.gov.me/en/documents/97a5b5fd-9e83-4b63-82fa-c8692a242f82>

The following strategic documents have been adopted in Montenegro steering the field of education, from the system level:

1. Reform agenda of Montenegro 2024-2027 for the EU Instrument for Reforms and Growth⁵⁰: based on the identified economy needs and towards accelerating the key reforms in the process of accession to the European Union, the general objective of Montenegro's Reform Agenda is to make use of the incentives of the European Union available through the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans related to four key policy areas: the business environment and private sector development, digital and energy/green transition, human capital development, and fundamental rights/rule of law.
2. Education Reform Strategy 2025- 2035⁵¹ that articulates four main strategic goals of the system: '(1) the education system provides high-quality, accessible and equitable education that fosters the holistic development of all children and adolescents, while being resilient to challenges and risks, (2) all employees in educational institutions equally and fully support the quality and equity of education, develop all the key competencies and skills of students, and maintain high expectations and positive attitudes towards all children and young people, (3) achieving higher quality and equity in the education system through improved governance and management, with an emphasis on the use of evidence and participation in the decision making process, (4) the education infrastructure and modern teaching resources support contemporary, high-quality, equitable and safe education for all children and young people underpinned by crosscutting teams of poverty reduction, gender, climate change and green skills, socio-emotional skills and wellbeing of children and digitalisation.
3. Career Guidance and Counselling Strategy 2025–2030⁵²: aimed at ensuring the career guidance and counselling to be accessible to all citizens, from early age to later life utilising an inter-sectoral approach by different departments, along with the equal inclusion of all target groups: pupils, teachers, parents, career counsellors in the Employment Agency of Montenegro and in educational institutions, adults, young people, the employed and the unemployed.
4. Strategy for the Digitalisation of the Education System 2022–2027⁵³ that envisages for the system to '(1) develop new electronic services, improve the work of the public sector and interdepartmental cooperation (2) create appropriate conditions in educational institutions for the successful enhancement of all digital processes, thereby contributing to the quality and inclusiveness of education (3) develop and improve pupils' digital skills necessary for further learning/the process of lifelong learning, the labour market, and functioning in a society and economy based on knowledge and innovation, and encourage pupils to choose professions in the field of ICT.
5. Strategy for the Development of Higher Education (2024-2027)⁵⁴: 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 labour market needs.

⁵⁰ <https://www.eu.me/download/1696/crna-gora-i-eu/31923/reformska-agenda-crne-gore-2024-2027.pdf>

⁵¹ <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/28743ee8-41ee-45a2-b178-3c4c6267ee09>

⁵² <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/c5343fcc-2a27-49ea-9a91-6c117b009076>

⁵³ <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/038614ce-395b-411b-ad40-8d89791a37fe>

⁵⁴ <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/6c5f22d1-e3b5-4846-a88d-46fdbf92fb88>

- Promoting lifelong learning and improving the integration of innovation in education. The strategy also emphasizes regional cooperation and adherence to EU guidelines.
6. National Employment Strategy (2021-2025)⁵⁵: As stated earlier in the document, this strategy focuses on improving the labour 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.
 - Strengthening active labour 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.
7. Youth Strategy 2023-2027⁵⁶: 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).

⁵⁵ <https://www.gov.me/en/documents/cc228dd3-f17b-47ce-ac2d-3b230ebcf2a6>

⁵⁶ <https://www.gov.me/en/article/cabinet-adopts-youth-strategy-for-2023-2027>

North Macedonia

The European Commission North Macedonia Report for 2025⁵⁷ acknowledges the progress in increasing the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union: ‘A new Law on vocational education and training includes some measures to address significant skills mismatches. The digitalisation of the economy is advancing, and new school curricula provide for better teaching of IT skills’ and in coming year North Macedonia should ‘increase financial and human resources to speed up the vocational education and training system reforms and implement the Law on secondary education’. The 2025 Report further acknowledges the adoption of the Law on adult education and the Law on vocational education and training and the adoption of the amendments to the Law on secondary education as well as overall partial implementation of the Commission’s recommendations from 2025.

In 2026 North Macedonia should in particular:

- *‘adopt a new Law on secondary education, develop implementing legislation on the Law on adult education and on VET, and continue to set up regional VET centres and ensure they are operational;*
- *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- 2026⁵⁸ recognizes that the education system in North Macedonia struggles to equip young people with the skills required for labour market participation, contributing to high youth unemployment and low productivity growth. Despite an increase in higher education graduates, curricula remain misaligned with labour 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. However, progress in establishing regional VET centres, 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 labour 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 labour 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.

⁵⁷ https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/north-macedonia-report-2025_en

⁵⁸ https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/f0d0a945-18a0-4332-ada3-b3a992be1333_en?filename=ip288_en.pdf

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, labour 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 Fulfil Their Potential"⁵⁹, 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)⁶⁰ 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.

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⁵⁹ https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/media/16161/file/InclusiveEducationPolicyBrief_NorthMacedonia.pdf.pdf

⁶⁰ <https://api.ams.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/nsm23-27-sluzhben-vesnik.pdf>

Serbia

The Strategy for Education Development in Serbia 2030 with the accompanying Action Plan (2021-2023)⁶¹ was adopted in June 2021. The Action Plan covering the period from 2023-2026⁶² 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.

Serbia has 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 terms of Serbia's capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union the European Commission's Report for 2025⁶³ acknowledges '*some progress in facilitating the school-to-work transition*' while stating that '*the educational outcomes are below the OECD average and public spending on education and research remains below the EU average.*' To that end Serbia should, among other, 'improve education outcomes and skills, including by increasing enrolment rates, modernising vocational education and training, and stepping up lifelong learning.'

The 2025 Report concludes that Serbia made no progress in 2025 '*While some positive steps were taken, in particular by further consolidating the national qualifications framework system, the delivery of quality education was impacted by the discontinuity of education throughout the 2024/2025 school year, measures worsening the working conditions of teaching staff and dismissals and nonrenewal of contracts of a high number of teaching staff and principals at the start of the new school year*'

⁶¹ https://prosveta.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/1-SROVRS-2030_MASTER_0402_V1.pdf

⁶² <https://prosveta.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Akcioni-plan-za-period-od-2023.-do-2026.-godine.pdf>

⁶³ https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2025_en

The 2025 Report further provides recommendations for 2026. Serbia should:

- *'support children and young people, notably the most vulnerable, by bridging learning gaps during the school year 2024/2025, improve the working conditions of teaching staff and 16 ensure respect of academic freedom, in line with the principles of the European Higher Education Area and the Bologna Follow-up Group;*
- *increase the number of children attending early childhood education and care, in particular children from disadvantaged backgrounds;*
- *ensure that the policy and institutional framework for quality assurance in higher education fully complies with the recommendations of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education'*

Economic Reform Programmes of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye (European Commission 2025) states that

'Although labour market outcomes have continued to improve, skills mismatches and brain drain continue to pose challenges for Serbia. The unemployment rate fell to 8.6% (127), near historic lows, while employment reached 51.4%. However, youth unemployment (ages 15-24) still stood high, at 25.8% compared to the EU average of 15.0% (128). The share of young people neither in employment nor education or training (NEET) remained also relatively significant (129). Ongoing reform efforts committed to in the Reform Agenda are consequently aimed at improving the employability of young people, including improving the legal framework for internship programmes as well as the implementation of the Youth Guarantee programme, which offers subsidised employment, training and internships. So far, a pilot Youth Guarantee scheme has started in three employment offices in January 2024. At the same time, the quality and relevance of education and training still needs improvement to meet labour market needs. The implementation of the education strategy for 2030 is ongoing, which includes the current modernisation of vocational education and training. Emigration also remains a long-standing problem, which Serbia has attempted to address by offering incentives such as tax relief for employers who hire highly skilled diaspora.' (European Union, 2025⁶⁴).

Economic Reform Programme for the Period 2025-2027⁶⁵ envisages the following actions that have the main objective to provide the *'Comprehensive support for the youth of the Republic of Serbia in formal and non-formal education and career paths to enable them to live fulfilled and independent lives with meaningful engagement in their local communities and the contemporary world:*

(1) Labour market

- *Improving labour market conditions, including ensuring adequate financial and institutional resources and capacity for activation in the field of employment and social policies.*
- *Implementing training and skills development programmes in critical sectors such as teacher education, to proactively address key factors affecting the skills and retention of the workforce in these areas.*

(2) Education and skills

- *Improving the quality of teaching and learning, equity and accessibility at all levels of education.*
- *Reducing skills mismatches in the labour market and facilitating the transition from school to work, including improvement of further primary and secondary education, including dual primary and secondary education, strengthening education, training and relevant upskilling for adults.'*

⁶⁴ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/23cdd2f1-40f2-11f0-b9f2-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

⁶⁵ <https://www.mfin.gov.rs/en/documents2-2/economic-reform-program-erp-2>

Annex 2: Regular ERI SEE activities

Activity	Quartal
ERI SEE Governing Board meetings	Q1, Q4
SEE VET Net activities	Q3-Q4
QA Network of experts activities	Q3-Q4
SEE TET activities	Q3-Q4
Higher education activities	Q3-Q4
Networking with other national and international institutions and initiatives	Q1-Q4
Preparation of new projects	Q1-Q4
Promotional activities and visibility	Q1-Q4

Plan

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

