

UNLOCKING YOUTH POTENTIAL IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE AND TURKEY

**Skills development for labour market
and social inclusion**

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PREFACE

The South Eastern European countries and Turkey are in the design phase of a new generation of strategies and actions concerning skills, employment and social inclusion. The EU IPA III programming requires sound, evidence-based input on what works in addressing youth joblessness in the context of economic, demographic, technological, and climate challenges. To inform these processes, the European Training Foundation (ETF) initiated in 2020 a study project assessing the situation of youth in relation to the changing labour market and social conditions in the region, and the implications for skills development, taking into consideration the socio-economic characteristics of the region and focusing on the most vulnerable groups.

The regional paper was jointly written by a team of ETF specialists: Mircea Badescu, Ulrike Damyanovic, Kristien Van den Eynde, Lida Kita and Cristina Mereuta. ETF specialists Romain Boitard, Anthony Gribben and Filippo Del Ninno reviewed the draft paper and provided comments and suggestions.

This publication would not have been possible without close cooperation with country stakeholders from the region, as it is based on countries' sharing of key documents on policy and strategies' implementation and their contributions to the ETF Torino Process 2018–20, reporting on the mid-term deliverables of the Riga Conclusions, assessment of the Small Business Act, or ETF data collection on education, skills and employment. We are grateful for these extensive contributions.

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
INTRODUCTION	9
1. TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO WORK AND YOUTH EMPLOYMENT	10
1.1 Youth in the SEET region – an untapped potential	10
1.2 Skills dimension of youth activation and employment	12
1.3 Policy responses to support youth employability	19
1.4 Statistics on youth: trends and methodological issues	23
2. ENTREPRENEURIAL ASPECTS OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING	25
2.1 Entrepreneurial learning and entrepreneurship in the SEET region	25
2.2 Developing a more entrepreneurial culture: state of play	27
3. SOCIAL INCLUSION AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT	33
3.1 Global and regional social context: old and new challenges	33
3.2 Social inclusion and cohesion	35
3.3 Skills matter	37
3.4 Skills for inclusion – good on paper but not reality	38
3.5 Smart, sustainable and inclusive skills policy making	40
4. EU YOUTH SUPPORT IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE AND TURKEY	42
4.1 EU policy dialogue: country and regional levels	42
4.2 Strategic and institutional setting in the Enlargement region: progress and challenges	43
4.3 EU, regional and global players: a common endeavour	44
4.4 EU funding support for youth: a flavour and some proposals for the future	46
5. THE WAY FORWARD	48
5.1 Dealing with uncertainty	48
5.2 Socioeconomic transformations and a renewed policy paradigm	50
5.3 Ensuring the sustainability of regular data collection tools	52
ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS	53
REFERENCES	54

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The paper focuses on young people in the region of South Eastern Europe and Turkey (SEET) and investigates their participation and performance in education and the labour market and their entrepreneurial potential. It also discusses the risks of social exclusion of young people in the region. The analysis illustrates that skills and labour market policies ‘came of age’ during the last decade, departing from rather weak links between education and labour market demand. The social ‘sensitivity’ of policies is discussed from the perspective of education systems and labour market policies’ responsiveness to the needs of learners and communities exposed to social risks and poverty. The paper also delves into the emerging risks for young learners, graduates and workers in the context of COVID-19 pandemic.

Challenges and opportunities for youth in SEET

The analysis shows that today young people in SEET enjoy improved education prospects. This is reflected in more years spent in education overall, as completion of upper secondary and tertiary education has significantly increased over the last decade in the region. Unemployment and economic inactivity rates have gradually receded, although large proportions of young people still remain outside education or the labour market in several SEET countries.

Educational attainment is a key predictor of employability in the region, although the relationship between the level and type of degree obtained by a student and the probability that they will get a qualifications-matched or satisfactory job is not straightforward. Overeducation is widespread among tertiary-educated workers and usually their first job experience is precarious, in informal, part-time, or temporary employment. Despite better education attainment levels, young women are prone to poorer-quality jobs, pay gaps and economic inactivity due to child-rearing and family care obligations or cultural norms and traditions. The rural–urban divide is also a strong factor in the probability of access to education, employment and job quality.

Current and future demographic dynamics in most countries of the region call for more decisive steps to tap into the potential of young people in the labour market as a strategy to counteract labour shortages triggered by ageing and emigration. Within the next ten years the Western Balkans region will register a significant drop in its young population, according to the available demographic projections. The population shrinkage may be even worse, because such projections do not fully capture fluctuations in emigration.

Beyond numerical shortages, the SEET countries still experience challenges in securing sufficient foundational skills among their youth populations, although a number of them have significantly improved their performance in the last rounds of PISA. Underachievement is strongly correlated with social factors such as family background or school and community environment. The relevance of skills generated through upper secondary, including vocational education and training (VET), and tertiary education, has gradually improved, thanks to closer collaboration between schools and the business sector and private sector engagement in delivering internships and apprenticeships. Dual education has been one of the most highly prioritised VET reforms in the region since the adoption of the Riga Conclusions on a new set of medium-term deliverables in the field of VET for the period 2015–20. However, the countries are still faced with deep economic and social transformations (including those triggered by COVID-19). Better integrated labour market and skills information

systems and solid career guidance can help young people navigate in such uncertain and volatile labour markets.

Highly flexible economies and labour market conditions call for workforces that are digitally and entrepreneurially fit. Several SEET countries have prioritised both initial and continuous programmes to build up digital skills as transversal and/or occupation-specific competences.

In the area of entrepreneurial learning and stimulation of entrepreneurship, all the countries in the region have shown a clear policy commitment to promoting entrepreneurial skills within a lifelong learning perspective. This includes standalone entrepreneurial learning strategies, or entrepreneurial learning as an integral part of wider policy instruments such as employment and/or education strategies, programmes or frameworks. The present analysis finds that countries would need to invest more in supporting youth entrepreneurship. There is a need to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public and private training provision. For example, start-up training should closely follow the needs of the learners and where they are on their entrepreneurial journeys. The potential of peer-to-peer learning and coaching could be further explored.

To enhance the labour market integration of young people, the SEET countries have also enhanced targeted policy making reflected in focused action plans or programmes. European Union (EU)-inspired Youth Guarantee measures have been devised, but challenges remain in the implementation of the preventive approach involving reintegration in initial education or continuous training, as well as in outreaching to the young people most in need (the remedial approach). Nevertheless, the public employment services in the region have built up their capacities to engage with and support young people.

Overall, better monitoring and evaluation of youth-centred programmes, be it activation, training, employment, or entrepreneurship support, is needed. Several steps have been made towards rigorous, net-effect measurement, but often such initiatives are project-based and ad-hoc.

The situation of young people, either employed or jobless, and particularly those exposed to social risks, remains a point of central interest for all countries. This paper finds that national policies have been more strongly oriented towards the promotion of employability and the adaptation of skills systems to labour market needs than to policies designed to overcome social exclusion. The causes of the social exclusion of youth, although well researched in the region, are insufficiently addressed through comprehensive and efficient policy measures. Indeed, education is a powerful equaliser of chances in the region. Inclusive education and training have been high on the policy agenda in recent years. Social inclusion goes hand in hand with economic development, and neither should exclude, or progress at the cost of, the other. The pursuit of economic growth alone cannot bring about societal gains and reduce poverty. Technology-driven disruption to jobs and skills and the latest impact of the COVID-19 pandemic reveal that adequate social protection requires more holistic approaches and coverage of potential beneficiaries, regardless of their labour market or social insurance status.

To realise the full potential of the region's youth and make use of the benefits of technological change, productivity, growth and job creation, SEET governments and stakeholders need to investigate how to make skills, employment and social goals an integral part of their innovation and technology diffusion policies.

This paper also reviews the contribution of the EU's youth-focused policy dialogue, cooperation and financial support for the countries of the SEET region. Several EU policy orientations and instruments

have inspired or supported the implementation of the youth agenda in the region. In general, available assessments or studies argue for a stronger interinstitutional coordination of policy and programmes aimed at improving the overall situation of young people in a multifaceted approach (education, health, employment, welfare, housing, civic participation). The main EU funding mechanism to support youth in the Western Balkans is the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) programme at country and regional levels and in all areas covered under youth policy (education and training, employment, health or culture). Therefore, in many of these initiatives, youth are indirect or direct target groups. The next cycle of IPA (2021–2027) is being reprogrammed in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Nevertheless, investments targeting youth are expected to increase. Promoting youth mobility for study, experience or peer exchange via Erasmus+ has proved successful in building up young people's chances of finding a job, learning new skills and enhancing cross-country youth cooperation. A number of actors, initiatives and projects, such as the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) or the Youth Policy Lab implemented by the Regional Cooperation Council, drive forward the regional dialogue and cooperation among youth organisations. The main lessons of the most recent years – and growing challenges in the context of the pandemic – call for a continuation and even expansion of EU and other donor support with well-targeted measures. Emphasis needs to be put on ensuring a high-quality digital learning environment. This should include access to infrastructure for inclusive education, training and support for teachers, trainers and mentors, agile modes of delivery of education programmes, and reliable assessment tools. It will also merit a look into new governance models in education and the world of work.

Key trends and messages

Several key findings and messages for policy action emerge from the study.

1. The SEET countries, European partners and the international community should strive to build the resilience of individuals and companies and devise agile public policies in the context of uncertain developments related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The impact of the pandemic on youth employment is likely to be severe, given that young people are already more exposed to joblessness than adults. Furthermore, COVID-19-related shocks to the labour market are likely to impact on the quality of jobs for young people. At the same time, employment opportunities are emerging for young people who are better educated, foreign-language proficient and more ready to adapt to digital work requirements. While short-term financial support is needed, a long-term strategy addressing the differing levels of impact should be considered. Promoting a narrative of opportunity may ease the transition into a post-pandemic economy; learning how to engage youth in a work culture in flux is just one way to work toward increasing the economy's resilience.

The crisis is an opportunity to accelerate transformation, be it in education systems, ways of working, doing business or social interaction. Digital transformation in initial and continuous education is crucial. However, the digital divide hinders children, students and jobseekers from attending classes. Insufficient readiness on the part of teachers, schools and training providers to deliver education digitally has led to an accumulation of learning losses and lost upskilling opportunities for those most in need. Such learning gaps need careful reflection and remedial measures.

Vulnerable young people are now at higher risk of being left behind in the provision of services and inclusion measures when national systems' capacities are overstretched because of COVID-

19. Tight labour market conditions will further limit their chances to take up a job or start up a business.

2. Younger generations lead and benefit the most from digital and green transformation of economies and societies. As learners, workers and entrepreneurs, they need access to good-quality education and employment programmes that promote a mindset geared towards entrepreneurship skills, to drive innovation and individual adaptability and resilience.

Even before COVID-19 struck, the SEET economies were undergoing transformations. Technology-induced changes, digitalisation and the goal of sustainability and green growth pose both challenges and opportunities for workforce adaptation. Innovation and technology create opportunities in the region and mitigate the propensity for migration among younger and skilled groups. An innovation reform model for VET that emphasises inclusive growth and social inclusion and cohesion should include a focus on technology adoption and innovation, with linkages between all levels of VET provision, sectoral and cross-sectoral skills development programmes, and the development of management skills and competences for a sustainable and entrepreneurial economy.

Beyond improving the relevance of skills generated through initial education and training systems, youth-guarantee-like interventions seem to work in shortening transitions from school to work. This calls for new roles and modes of cooperation among schools, labour market intermediaries, social assistance centres, youth organisations, social partners and local public administrations. Overall, it calls for a renewed paradigm of education, training, employment and social policies to fit a very fluid labour market and rapidly changing social and economic needs.

3. The SEET countries will need to
 - ensure the resources and conditions to allow for systematic graduate tracking at secondary and tertiary education levels and regular analysis of changing skills needs;
 - consistently follow up participants in active labour market measures and measure the effects on employment;
 - perform more fine-grained analysis of social exclusion and poverty, skills mismatches and labour market transitions, with a focus on young people.

Obtaining evidence of the effectiveness and efficiency of policy interventions targeting youth remains an issue. The availability and comparability of surveys and youth-relevant administrative data have improved over time, but often their potential is underused in policy design and monitoring.

Other issues for consideration concern quality assurance of the methodological arrangements and their improvement and diversification over time, for example, ensuring representative samples; making more extensive use of combined administrative and survey data; linking various databases (education and employment information systems, social security systems, etc.) to exploit the wealth of information; and introducing longitudinal surveys.

Of crucial importance is the building of institutional partnerships for tracking data collection, interpretation, analysis and dissemination. The SEET countries will need to ensure that the results will feed regularly back into their policy-making cycles.

INTRODUCTION

Although the region's economic prospects have improved over recent years, youth joblessness and precarious employment remain relatively high in SEET¹. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic challenge the performance of education systems, transitions from school to work, and the upward career trajectories of young workers. Although it was too early to assess its full impact at the time of drafting, it is assumed that the pandemic will change economies in the short and possibly the medium term, and that this will be reflected in labour market contraction and shifts in skills demand and overall job opportunities in Europe and worldwide. It will also deepen inequalities and offset the SEET countries' advances in tackling poverty and social exclusion.

The level and relevance of education is key to young people's employment prospects, career development, and social inclusion in the region. Nevertheless, as this report shows, the education systems still reveal shortcomings as regards catering for all students and equipping young graduates with relevant skills. Insufficient or inefficient correlation with other policy strands such as employment, economy, social services and social protection leave many children and young people at risk of early school dropout, social exclusion and poverty.

As the SEET region moves into a new decade, it is developing its policies towards the 2030 horizon. The ETF devised this paper to take stock of the major developments in the areas of skills, employment, entrepreneurship and social inclusion, and to review the potential for EU support towards strengthening and complementing the countries' actions targeting skills development and job opportunities for youth. The paper aims to inform the countries of the region, and also EU institutions, international organisations, donors and regional actors, as regards promising support interventions or priorities for the future.

The first chapter of the paper focuses on the transition from school to work and youth employment. The second chapter reviews initiatives in entrepreneurial learning and entrepreneurship aimed at helping young people to gain relevant skills and find employment in a less structured and predictable labour market. The third chapter investigates skills potential for social inclusion in the region, while the fourth reviews the EU–SEET policy dialogue and EU financial support relevant to the promotion of the youth agenda, with a focus on skills development. The final chapter draws some conclusions and puts forward several priorities for the future to be considered by the SEET countries, the EU and international actors.

¹ The region comprises seven countries: Turkey and the Western Balkan countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. *This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence, hereinafter 'Kosovo'.

1. TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO WORK AND YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

Youth joblessness and precarious employment in the SEET region score among the highest in Europe, despite the improvements in economic prospects of recent years. High levels of economic inactivity and unemployment among young people often coexist with increasing skills shortages. Datasets such as the employment and unemployment statistics made available by the statistical offices of the SEET countries and Eurostat show the disproportionate exposure of children and young people to poverty and risks of social exclusion and the deep regional disparities in employment generation and skills acquisition.

Several factors explain the precarious position of the region's young people in the labour market:

1. a difficult transition from school to work due to insufficient employability levels and insufficient support during such transition periods;

unattractive working conditions, reflected in informality, wage levels, occupational health and safety, and insufficient mentorship and/or coaching arrangements for newly hired workers;

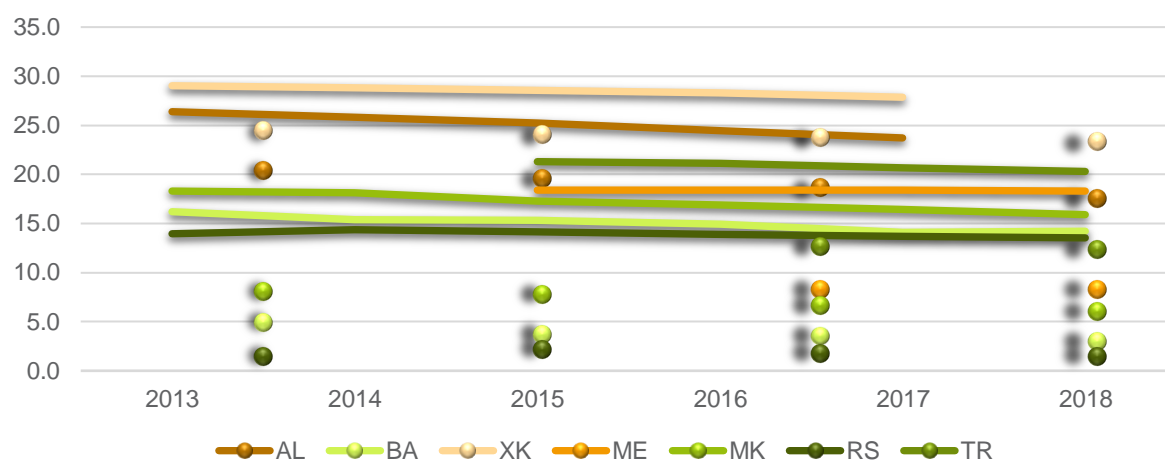
skill sets that do not correspond to the current and future skills needs of the economy.

This chapter focuses on skills development and its significance in the context of youth labour market participation. It also reviews the demographic and socioeconomic potential of the region and discusses the medium- to long-term implications for education and training systems and policies supporting employability.

1.1 Youth in the SEET region – an untapped potential

Demographic dynamics in most countries of the region signal a crucial need to tap into the current potential of the younger workforce through relevant education and training and efficient measures supporting employment, among others, and to give full value to young people's skills in the labour market. This can, to some extent, offset the negative effects on skills availability triggered by ageing and emigration and the skills depletion due to long spells of joblessness. While Kosovo, Albania and Turkey still enjoy a window of opportunity with higher proportions of younger cohorts in the working-age population, the remaining SEET countries face potential shrinkage of their workforces as a result of an ageing population.

FIGURE 1.1 RELATIVE SIZE OF THE YOUTH POPULATION (% AGED 15–24), 2013–18



Note: AL – Albania; BA – Bosnia and Herzegovina; ME – Montenegro; MK – North Macedonia; RS – Serbia; TR – Turkey; XK – Kosovo.

Sources: Eurostat; national statistical offices.

All SEET countries have declining proportions of people aged 15–24 in the working-age population. This is worrying, as the propensity for emigration is likely to augment shortfalls in the workforce potential over the next years, particularly in the Western Balkans countries.

Seen in the context of trends in Europe’s overall population evolution over the past two decades, the SEET region presents a snapshot of continuous decline in the ratio of young population (children and young people aged 0–24) to adult population aged 25–64, as shown in Table 1.1. Although Albania and Turkey still register high proportions of young people, the last 20 years reveal a very sharp decrease in the youth dependency ratio.

TABLE 1.1 YOUTH DEPENDENCY RATIO IN SEET, 2000–20 (%)

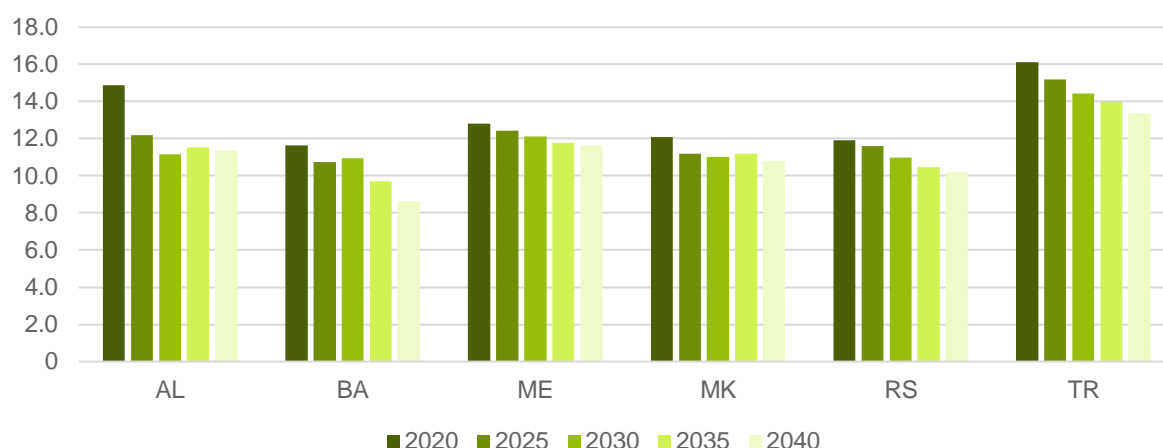
	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
Albania	103.4	96.4	83.7	69.7	60.4
Bosnia and Herzegovina	66.4	60.9	53.6	48.8	46.7
Montenegro	71.5	69.9	63.2	59.3	57.8
North Macedonia	76.7	69.2	60.8	53.7	49.7
Serbia	67.6	62.7	57.1	52.3	50.9
Turkey	114.8	102.4	91.1	84.4	78.6

Note: Ratio of population aged 0–24 per 100 population 25–64; no data available for Kosovo.

Source: UN-DESA, World Population Prospects 2019.

The region will continue, potentially, to experience a shrinkage in the youth population over the longer term (up to 2040), according to the population projections performed by the United Nations’ Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA). By 2030, the percentage of young people aged 15–24 in the total population will be around 11% in all Western Balkans countries (except Montenegro, where the percentage will stand at 12%). Over the next two decades (up to 2040), Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Turkey will face the sharpest decline in youth proportions.

FIGURE 1.2 PERCENTAGE OF YOUTH (AGED 15–24) IN TOTAL POPULATION, 2020–40



Note: Projection done on medium fertility variant; no data available for Kosovo.
Source: UN-DESA, World Population Prospects 2019.

In real terms, the demographic decline means a drop of almost 700 000 young people in the Western Balkans countries², from 2.5 million young people in 2020 to 2.1 million by 2030 and 1.8 million by 2040. Similarly, Turkey will face a decrease of about 1 million young people (from 13.5 million in 2020 to 12.5 million in 2040).

However, long-term demographic projections are rather indicative, given the volatile population dynamics in the Western Balkans. Emigration for work is widespread in the region among younger population groups, as shown by various studies (Vidovic et al., 2018; FES, 2019) and statistics of the main destination countries (e.g. Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy). Young people’s expectations of moving abroad have increased significantly over recent years. Both push and pull factors are manifest in the region, including its proximity to the EU and the tradition of migration for work to developed European economies; unappealing wages or poor availability and quality of job opportunities; and serious shortages of (skilled) workforce in the EU countries that are at the peak of labour market withdrawal by the post-war boom generation.

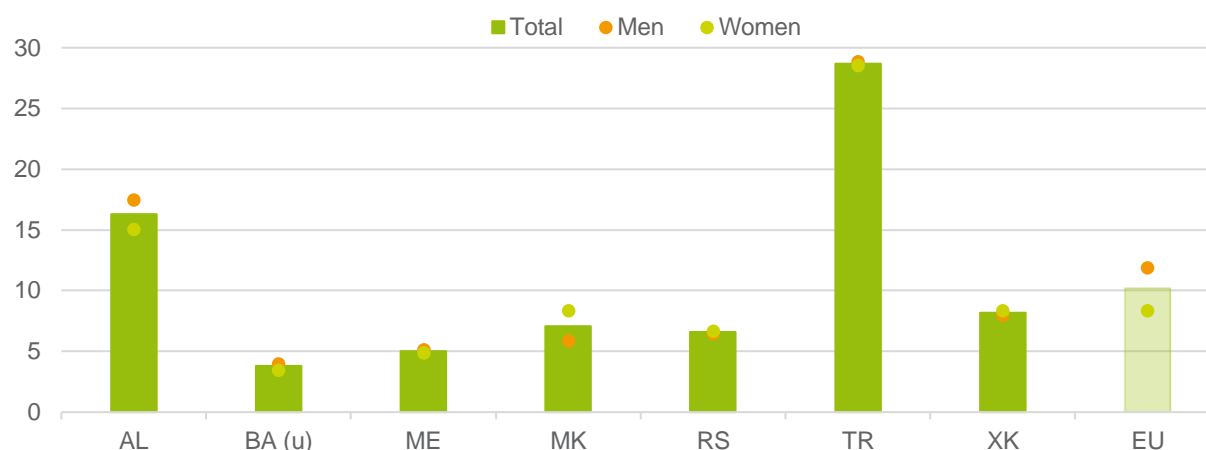
1.2 Skills dimension of youth activation and employment

Participation in education

School-to-work transition and youth integration in employment have improved overall in the region over the last decade, with a fall in youth unemployment and non-education-related inactivity. This reflects the longer periods spent in education as the duration of upper secondary and tertiary education has significantly increased over the last decade. Early school leaving, or dropout – the percentage of youth aged 18–24 with at most lower secondary education who are no longer in education or training – stands below the EU average, except in Albania and Turkey, although these countries have also managed to mitigate school dropout. Reducing the incidence of early leaving is an important element in mitigating the risk of social exclusion.

² Data sources: for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia – UN-DESA; for Kosovo – Kosovo Agency of Statistics (population projections data available online).

FIGURE 1.3 PERCENTAGE OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS (AGED 18–24), 2019



Note: u – unreliable.

Sources: ETF database; Eurostat.

VET can mitigate the risk of dropout, even though the relationship is not always a straightforward one. Nevertheless, some patterns can be identified, based on the ETF data. In 2019, fewer than 10% of 18–24-year-olds dropped out of school before completing upper secondary education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia and Kosovo. All the countries share a very high proportion (up to 75%) of upper secondary students enrolled in vocational programmes. Keeping young people in education while upskilling them through vocational qualifications has proved to be a successful policy option in these countries (ETF, 2019a).

At the same time, high retention rates in education reflected in lower dropout coexist with shortcomings in educational performance and quality assurance, particularly at lower secondary level, as reflected in PISA results (see further discussion below).

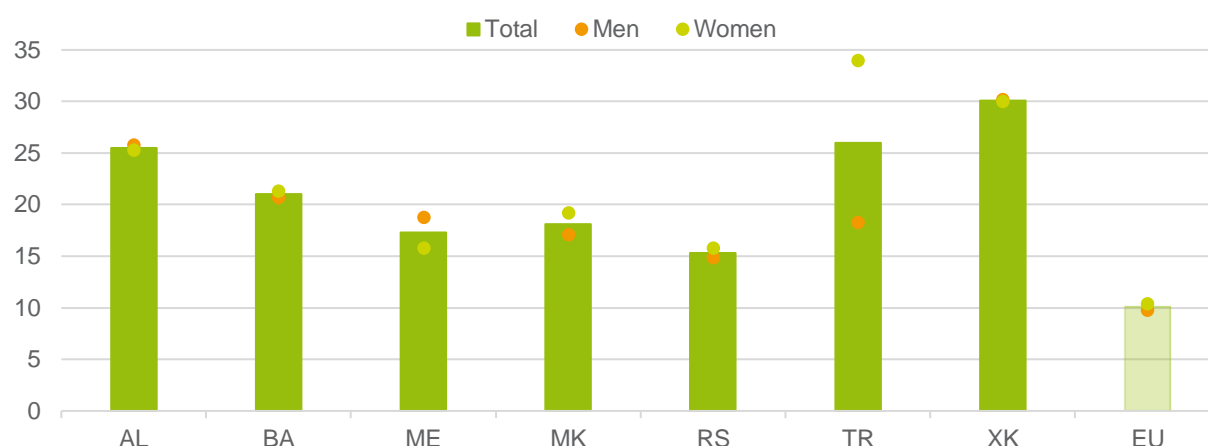
Youth joblessness

Lowering the incidence of young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) mirrors positive economic developments in the region, where countries have managed to recover from the 2008–10 economic recession, attract new investments, and stabilise economies and public budgets.

Up to 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit all economies heavily, the numbers of young people not in education or employment decreased steadily, reaching levels below 20% in Serbia and Montenegro and around 25% in the remaining countries except Kosovo. The overall level for SEET stands well above the EU average and disproportionately affects young women in North Macedonia and Turkey³.

³ For consistency reasons most of the indicators discussed in this report cover the age groups up to 24 (i.e. 15–24 or 18–24), as in general this is the age range when the transition from school to the labour market and adult life takes place. In the case of NEETs, however, it is revealing to look also at the incidence after the age of 25: young women tend to become economically inactive around the age range 25–29, becoming involved in motherhood and increased household obligations, including caring for family dependants.

FIGURE 1.4 SHARE OF YOUNG PEOPLE (AGED 15–24) NOT IN EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION OR TRAINING, 2019



Sources: ETF database; Eurostat.

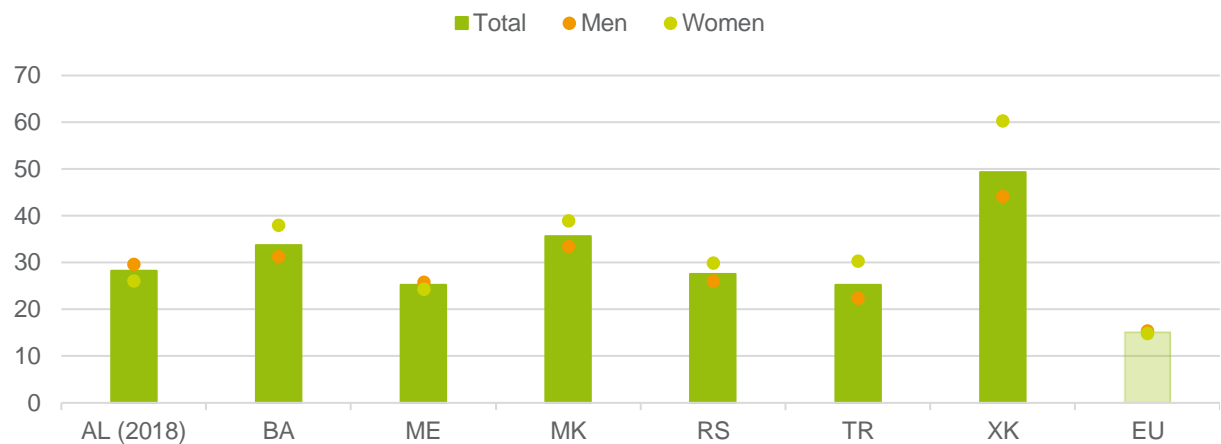
NEETs are at higher risk of being socially and economically excluded and so are more likely to become vulnerable in the long term. The NEET category contains a variety of subgroups, some of which are more vulnerable than others. ETF evidence shows that some factors are more important than others in determining NEET status (ETF, 2015). The high incidence of NEETs in the ETF's partner countries is often related to lower educational attainment, gender, lower employability as a result of skills gaps, and socioeconomic background. The high heterogeneity of the NEET population needs to be further considered when designing policies for vulnerable groups and their (re-)engagement with the labour market or the education system (ETF, 2019a).

As the COVID-19 pandemic impacts on economies, labour markets and skills demand, it will limit employment opportunities both for youth and more generally. Preliminary assessments available at the time of the draft of this paper show a global economy crippled, with supply and demand patterns drastically changed and huge spikes in joblessness. In the short to medium term, youth employment opportunities will depend on the severity of the economic crisis and its duration, the characteristics of recovery (e.g. new or enhanced demand in certain industries, technology-driven solutions, or new forms of work), and the extent to which young people can take up such new opportunities.

As employment is sensitive to economic shocks, in 2020 a significant increase in joblessness, including among young people, is expected. The European Commission (Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs) forecast a contraction in the volume of GDP (i.e. percentage change on previous year) ranging from 3.9% in North Macedonia to 5.9% in Montenegro (European Commission, 2020). Similarly, estimates of employment and unemployment levels in 2020 reveal a strong depreciation, with employment rates lowered by over 3% in Albania and Serbia and even 4% in Turkey. The total unemployment rate is expected to increase in all the countries by 2–3 percentage points. Youth unemployment rates have traditionally been higher than those of other age groups, and there are clearly some strong determinants. Youth unemployment is more responsive than adult unemployment to the business cycle, because young people are more concentrated in certain economic sectors and a disproportionate number of them hold precarious part-time jobs and temporary contracts. For that reason, they are also more affected by periods of economic crisis and are often among the first to lose their jobs.

This increased youth unemployment will offset the progress the SEET countries have made in recent years, reflected in improved labour market indicators. In the pre-2020 crisis, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina registered the most worrying youth unemployment levels, around 40% and above (Kosovo 50%). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will worsen the picture, although as the paper is being compiled it is too early to make full and accurate estimations about unemployment.

FIGURE 1.5 YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT RATE (% OF 15–24-YEAR-OLDS), 2019



Sources: ETF database; Eurostat.

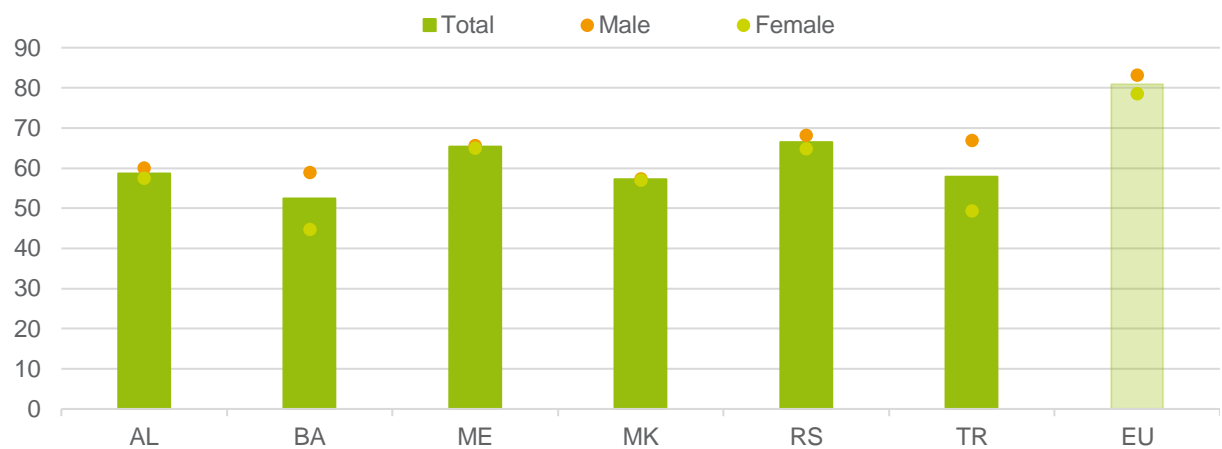
Youth employment

However, several COVID-19-induced immediate effects, such as the online delivery of certain activities during lockdown (e.g. retail, education) and accelerated digitalisation of economies, may favour a younger workforce with stronger digital and foreign-language skills and higher adaptability.

Younger people have higher education levels overall compared to those aged 30 and older. A higher level of education is indeed a predictor for smoother labour market access. School-to-work transition surveys run by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in three countries of the region (Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia) revealed very long spells of joblessness and lengthy transitions to work for young people with low levels of education (ISCED 0–2). Available tracer studies and/or other ad-hoc surveys confirm the importance of skills in securing better chances to become employed or transit successfully to more rewarding jobs and upward career trajectories.

A relevant indicator of the performance of youth entry into the labour market is the employment rate of recent graduates (students who graduated at the upper secondary and tertiary levels, ISCED 3–8), measured over a period from one to three years after graduation by means of labour force surveys. Where data are available, SEET countries are found to score below the EU average but to have improved rates since 2012. In the countries for which disaggregated data by type of education are available, graduates of upper secondary and post-secondary education (ISCED 3–4) with VET have better employment rates than their peers who graduated from a general or academic programme at secondary level.

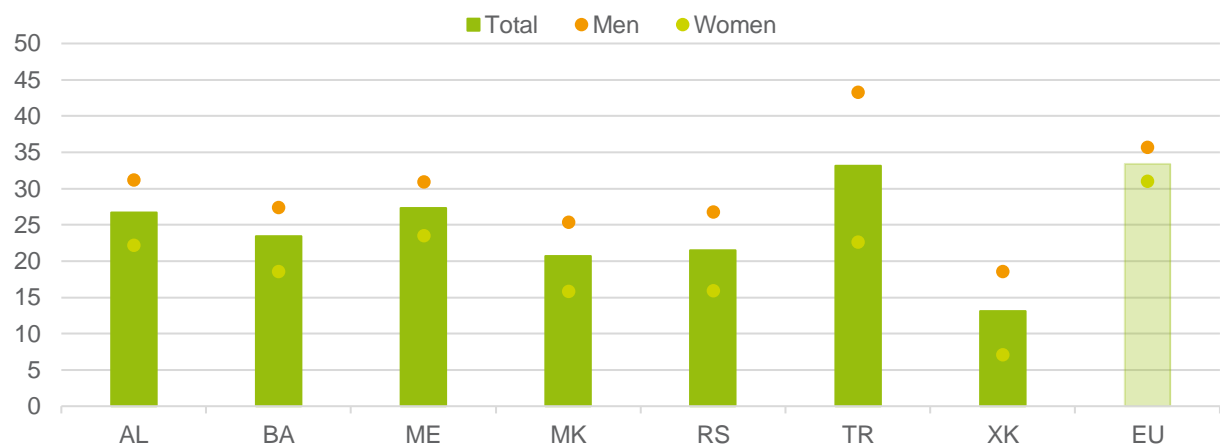
FIGURE 1.6 EMPLOYMENT RATE OF RECENT GRADUATES (% OF 20–34-YEAR-OLDS WITH ISCED 3–8 ATTAINMENT), 2019



Source: ETF database; Eurostat.

The gender dimension of the SEET labour market is noticeable even at younger ages and indicates that women are at lifelong risk of remaining or becoming inactive in the labour market, accessing poorer-quality jobs, or experiencing gender pay gaps. Employment rates for the 15–24 age group reveal deep gender disparities: these are partly explained by the fact that young women spend longer in education than young men and hence have higher inactivity related to pursue of studies, but there is also the risk that young girls and women will become inactive due to child-rearing and family care obligations or traditions and cultural norms. The largest gender gaps in youth employment is visible in Turkey and the lowest in Montenegro.

FIGURE 1.7 YOUTH EMPLOYMENT RATE (% OF 15–24-YEAR-OLDS), 2019



Source: ETF database; Eurostat.

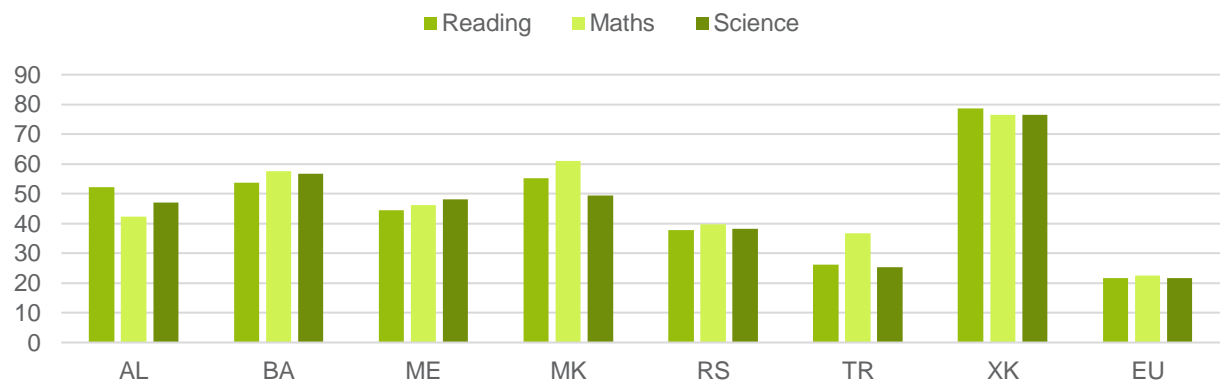
Underachievement in foundational skills

Improved education outcomes in terms of attainment coexist, however, with shortcomings in skills acquisition and relevance. One of the main challenges in the SEET countries is that of tackling underachievement in key competences. PISA 2018 shows high levels of underachievement (students who are failing Level 2 on the PISA scale in reading, mathematics and science) in nearly all the countries except Serbia and Turkey. This indicator provides a measure of the population most at risk

because of a lack of foundational skills. It confirms that the countries of the region have still a lot to do in ensuring that learners in primary and lower secondary education acquire the necessary foundational skills in literacy, mathematics and science. When analysing the incidence of low achievement among students aged 15, it is worth noting that in most ETF partner countries, this is the typical age for entering VET. Thus, students entering VET are at high risk as a result of a lack of foundational skills. Whereas in all the Western Balkan countries, from around 40% to 80% of pupils are underperforming in foundation skills, Turkey is the only country that has managed to progress significantly since the previous PISA round (2015) and achieve scores closer to the EU average.

PISA also makes it possible to analyse national performance by socioeconomic status and immigrant background. The results show that underachievement is significantly correlated with social aspects such as family background (including income level, parents' labour market status or level of education) and school and community environment. Schools located in rural and peripheral urban settings or in communities with large ethnic minorities, particularly Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians, tend to score lower in education assessments. This calls for targeted remedial measures to address the divide in education, and accompanying social measures, services and support for vulnerable children, families and communities.

FIGURE 1.8 UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN READING, MATHEMATICS AND SCIENCE (% OF 15-YEAR-OLDS), 2018



Source: OECD-PISA (2018).

A high level of underachievement in foundational skills (literacy, mathematics and science) can be considered as a loss in human capital. However, this is a complex issue. The time a pupil spends in school may translate unevenly into learning, depending on the quality of the teachers and other factors. Schooling and learning are fundamental aspects of any assessment of the quantity and quality of education. The test scores (e.g. OECD-PISA or IEA-TIMSS) can be used to convert the expected years of schooling (the number of years at school a child can expect to obtain by a specific age given the prevailing pattern of enrolment rates) into learning-adjusted years of schooling; the disparity between the two represents a learning gap. The learning gap can be as high as five years in Kosovo and four in North Macedonia and Albania, indicating that the effectiveness of the educational system is low.

Job-related skills

Beyond the foundational and other skills and competences, what also counts for labour market integration is relevant job-related skills⁴. Except for Albania, the SEET countries have large cohorts of upper secondary students enrolled in VET programmes (from around 50% in Turkey and Kosovo to over 70% in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia). This is positive, since most of the labour demand is centred around mid-level, VET-specific qualifications. However, the labour market relevance of certain VET programmes is still a challenge, and the countries are prioritising stronger collaboration with the business sector, dual education modalities to deliver VET, upgrading of school workshops and equipment, and further training of teachers, instructors and mentors.

Increasing numbers of young people are now completing tertiary education programmes: in some SEET countries they now represent up to one-third of the population aged 30–34. Some countries with a low proportion of tertiary graduates have seen a significant and rapid increase in the size of this group in the past decade. However, this increase has not always led to better employment prospects and, in some countries, holding a university degree does not always mean being employed and/or job matched. Unfortunately, tertiary education has not always gone hand in hand with labour market demand, fuelling skills mismatches and enrolment skewed towards law, business and humanities studies at the expense of science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

The study on skills mismatches in the ETF partner countries, including several SEET countries, reveals that workers with tertiary education are exposed to overqualification, with one in four employees in Serbia and one in five in North Macedonia working in jobs below their level of education (ETF, 2019b). Young people are also more likely to be mismatched compared to middle-aged labour market participants, as they often accept jobs below their actual qualification level as a strategy to gain practical skills or accumulate enough experience to progress further in their careers. In particular occupational areas, employers prefer a tertiary-level graduate although the job is classified as requiring only mid-level education, e.g. receptionist or one of many other highly specialised, demanding jobs in the tourism sector. Such persistent, often country-specific cases of vertical mismatch should be further investigated, and education authorities should try adapting the educational offer accordingly by strengthening the acquisition of various skills, in particular foreign language, digital and interpersonal skills.

Eurostat (2018) calculates the incidence of overqualification in Turkey at around one in three workers with tertiary education. This is a worrying signal of human capital wastage, as more highly educated workers are not using their real potential in the labour market. Workers with mid-level qualifications (ISCED 3–4) enjoy better-matched positions.

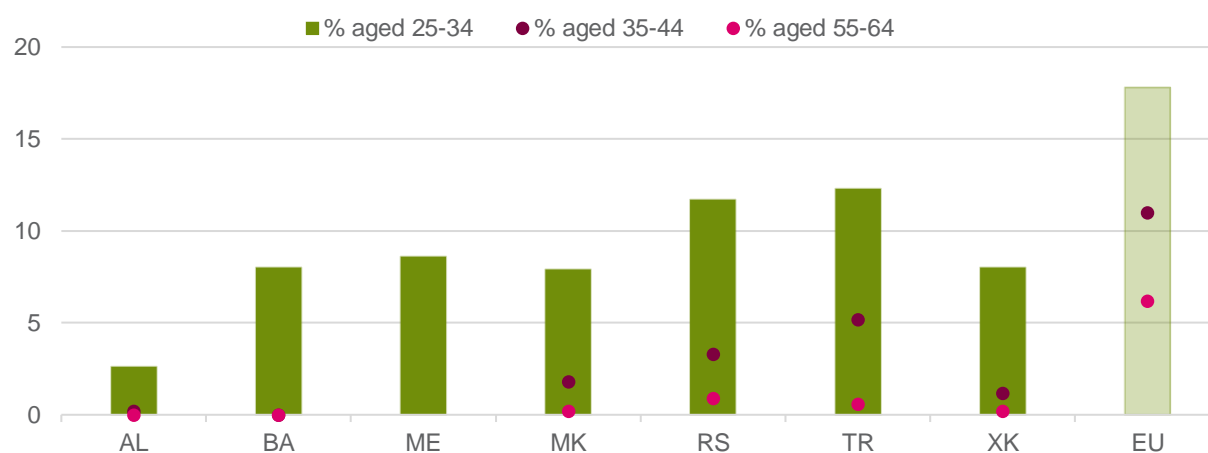
As all countries in the region are engaged in innovation, research and smart specialisation initiatives, this may lead to a stronger demand for tertiary and upper secondary qualified workers with future-proofed skill sets (occupational, digital, entrepreneurial and other key competences that can secure the workers' adaptability and flexibility). It may also help alleviate the incidence of overqualification.

⁴ There are various taxonomies of skills and competences; however, in the context of this report the following frameworks and definitions are used as references: key competences for lifelong learning (as reflected in the Council Recommendation of 2018), and additional EU competence frameworks, such as the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp) and the European Entrepreneurship Competence Framework (EntreComp).

Lifelong learning

Initial secondary and upper secondary education systems (particularly VET programmes) should continuously adjust to newer demands, but lifelong learning opportunities are also needed for the continuous adaptation of the workforce, even at younger ages, as the dynamic of economies and workplaces accelerates. In general, labour force surveys highlight that younger adult people in the SEET region (aged 25–34) tend to participate more in lifelong learning. However, continuation of university or post-university studies after the age of 25 might explain the higher participation rates among those aged 25–34 compared to overall participation in lifelong learning for the whole adult population (aged 25–64).

FIGURE 1.9 PARTICIPATION IN LIFELONG LEARNING, 2019



Source: ETF database; Eurostat.

Over the last decade, the skills and employment outlook has improved for younger generations in the SEET region. Major challenges remain, however. These can be summarised as follows:

1. securing relevant and inclusive education;
2. providing upskilling or reskilling and work experience opportunities during transitions from school to work or during the early stages of a professional career;
3. catering for those who are most exposed to poverty, social exclusion and informal work;
4. support for faster and well-matched transitions to employment.

1.3 Policy responses to support youth employability

Addressing the needs of youth is a challenge widely acknowledged in the region and reflected in national strategic priorities, conclusions of the EU dialogue with the Western Balkans and Turkey, and regional cooperation processes. Young people face serious risks of exclusion and need enhanced access to holistic services responding to their needs in the areas of education, employment, social and health protection, participation in society and decision making, and so on. Over the past years, SEET country strategies targeting education or employment and the economic reform programmes (programmes elaborated by the SEET countries in the framework of the political and economic cooperation between the EU and the Enlargement region, aimed at boosting competitiveness and the

implementation of sectoral reforms to support inclusive growth) underlined the need to improve education–labour market interfaces and boost the provision of quality employment services and adequate social support, particularly to groups exposed to exclusion⁵. Such aspects were reflected in the country-specific policy guidance, part of the EU–SEET policy dialogue and economic governance processes.

As reiterated in the latest ETF Torino Process regional analysis for SEET, the situation of young people (employed or jobless), particularly those exposed to social risks, remains a point of central interest for all countries (ETF, 2019c). The SEET countries, in many cases with EU and international community support, have developed various types of policy action and targeted intervention.

Integrating skills and employment priorities

Strategic and action planning in the area of youth employment and skills development is relatively well developed in the region, with dedicated strategies and action plans. The existing strategies prioritise quality education to equip young graduates with the right skills for employment and catering for the specific needs of vulnerable learners or jobseekers, including school retention, second-chance education or further training, and dedicated programmes geared towards employment. A specific policy approach that has gained traction in recent years in the region is to boost work-based learning and the acquisition of work experience. All the countries are initiating or already fully implementing dual education reforms aimed at bringing together schools and companies for VET development, including expanding practical education and fostering a stronger involvement of the private sector in the identification, assessment and certification of skills needs. The importance of school–business cooperation is further addressed below in the chapter on entrepreneurial learning.

The 2018–20 round of the Torino Process in the SEET region reveals some of the challenges that VET systems in the region face in the area of skills relevance. Most are related to rigidity in the delivery of new programmes or the adaptation of existing ones to new occupational content and/or technology. Among the reasons for this is insufficient flexibility in mobilising teachers and trainers for education programmes demanded by the labour market, and poor investment in continuous development programmes for teachers. Despite prioritisation at the policy level, schools and the private sector still do not have sufficient capacity to support the teaching of job-related skills and work experience for young graduates at upper secondary and tertiary levels.

One policy initiative to support the integration of young people into the labour market is the Youth Guarantee scheme. Set out in the 2013 Recommendation of the Council of the European Union, the scheme reflects the commitment of the EU Member States to ensuring that all young people under 25 receive a good-quality offer of employment, education or apprenticeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education. However, full take-up of such a commitment, which would cover both unemployed and inactive young people who are outside education systems, has been hindered by inadequate resources, funding and institutional capacity in the SEET region.

⁵ The countries of the region, like many other countries around the globe, do not use one single definition or classification of groups exposed to exclusion. In this paper, we refer to groups of (young) people falling below the poverty threshold and/or experiencing various types of material deprivation (as measured by national surveys on income and living conditions, for example) and other groups typically recognised in the national strategies or regulations as being exposed to exclusion, discrimination, poverty or other disadvantages: members of ethnic minorities, particularly in this region the minority of Roma, Ashkali, Egyptians, (long-term) unemployed, people with disability, single parents, people living in rural or remote areas, etc.

Most recently, on 1 July 2020, the European Commission launched a new youth package, ‘Youth Employment Support: a bridge to jobs for the next generation’, which includes a proposal for a new recommendation on the Youth Guarantee scheme.

The countries of the region have moved towards a more timely and targeted support to young jobseekers, reflected in dedicated activation programmes and specialised staff in public employment services. Such interventions included rapid job orientation and offers of counselling and/or matching services to newly registered young jobseekers, dedicated work experience programmes such as internships or (re)training courses, and entrepreneurship promotion measures.

For example, in 2018, North Macedonia began piloting Youth Guarantee in three employment centres. The lessons learnt guided the expansion of the Youth Guarantee approach to the whole country, particularly in the more economically deprived areas. The programme targets people aged up to 29 in a labour market where the young are disproportionately affected by unemployment, and also women, whose high incidence of labour market disengagement is reflected in very high inactivity rates. The Employment Agency is the main implementing actor, and it has developed intense collaboration with the education sector, companies and social work centres to carry out early interventions, activation and labour market integration measures. The design and full-scale implementation of the Youth Guarantee in North Macedonia also led to structural changes in the Public Employment Service. A specialised youth employment unit was created within the Department for Active Employment Measures and Services, and specialised staff training and modernisation of local employment offices are foreseen. Both the public budget and EU IPA support the implementation of the Youth Guarantee approach in the country.

Other countries from the region devised targeted actions to support youth employment, such as Kosovo, with a dedicated action plan for the integration of young people in the labour market. The ministries of Labour and Education and the Employment Agency, in collaboration with municipalities, donors and other actors, implemented more intensive career guidance and school–business collaboration initiatives to improve the transition of graduates to employment; while the Employment Agency has constantly increased the participation of young jobseekers in active labour market measures. In Turkey, the Public Employment Service (ISKUR) promoted employment and skills development schemes for young jobseekers and, with EU financial support, will promote a comprehensive support package for young NEETs. Montenegro continues its overarching internship programme for recent university graduates, while the National Employment Service of Serbia prioritised young jobseekers’ access to job placement and counselling, trained its staff to deal with young clients, and built partnerships with local administration, youth organisations and other private or not-for-profit entities to mobilise more resources for young people’s social inclusion and labour market integration.

Although comprehensive, regular impact assessments of active labour market programmes are underdeveloped in the region, evidence points to positive effects on the activation of young people, though a greater focus on those young people most in need is required. For example, in the case of general active labour market programmes, youth-targeted programmes overprioritise young people more likely to gain employment, such as university graduates.

In the drive for improved school-to-work transition and youth employment, career counselling and guidance are the least developed. No consistent data across countries is available on participation in career guidance sessions during the years of schooling, and the information that is available shows that young people and parents make uninformed or biased decisions on education programmes at

upper secondary and tertiary levels of education. This is due to insufficiently developed labour market and skills intelligence systems, which should include consistent and outreaching channels for the dissemination of information about future skills demand and evolving labour market changes.

Catering for the disadvantaged

The situation of vulnerable young people remains a real point of concern as economic growth and an improving labour market situation have not translated into better employment and social integration opportunities for all young people, especially for those in rural areas, those with low educational attainment, women, members of ethnic minorities and people with disabilities.

All the countries are working on devising more encompassing employment and social inclusion programmes to capture and address some of the social challenges and shortcomings that often impact on the effectiveness of employment programmes. The increased availability of robust social statistics, such as surveys on income and living conditions, or more sensitive registers (administrative databases), can help towards more effective and efficient programme design, including proper targeting of the population groups exposed to social exclusion risks and the design of more adequate employment stimulation or employability programmes. Where data are available, they show that children and young people from households with very low work intensity (i.e. those that contain family members with no or very limited work engagement) tend to discontinue education, fail to get employed, and thus continue the vicious cycle of poverty and exclusion their parents have experienced. This calls for more sophisticated and timely integration programmes, such as

- the early-warning mechanism on the risk of education dropout in Montenegro;
- combined education and social inclusion programmes for young people in Serbia or Albania;
- targeted support programmes for NEETs in Turkey and North Macedonia;
- youth-focused entrepreneurship and activation schemes in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Tackling the challenge of emigration by skilled youth

A prominent issue in the Western Balkans, as in other regions of the EU neighbourhood, is the propensity for emigration of young graduates and young workers in general. Although it is difficult to capture migration flows in regular information or statistical sources, the countries try to reflect these trends in their policy making with targeted reintegration measures for returning emigrants. A more preventive approach is somewhat constrained by the still deep differentials in earnings and quality or diversity of job opportunities between the Western Balkans and the destination countries, which are mostly EU Member States with more advanced economies.

A policy initiative in Serbia reveals a reinforced approach to the migration challenge, particularly the 'brain drain', by stimulating circular migration and attracting a highly qualified Serbian diaspora. A reform measure put forward in the latest Serbia Economic Reform Programme (2020–2022) links up the potential for research and innovation, technology development, and business expansion with fuller utilisation of the skills of highly skilled emigrants. The government of Serbia devised measures to stimulate the return of skilled emigrants through tax incentives, faster recognition of diplomas and skills, and other measures to encourage researchers and highly specialised workers to return and build their careers in Serbia.

Embracing the opportunities of the digital age

Advances in digital labour platforms and other forms of online work, including for companies abroad, may offer viable alternatives to emigration and joblessness. Available sources of information and research, although rather partial, show that it is mostly young people who engage in these new forms of work. Challenges persist as regards the formalisation of working relationships in online environments, the risks of further inequalities and poor social protection coverage, the recognition of skills acquired or developed in online work contexts, and work–life balance. Nevertheless, online workers show high resilience and adaptability and a strong entrepreneurial attitude, and often end up establishing their own companies.

Online work and professional activities suited for an electronic environment are proving to be the most resilient in the challenging context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Emerging information, most of it empirical, on companies' and individuals' strategies for coping with lockdown restrictions show that teleworking, distance work and online work have been mainstreamed in many economic activities. Demand for new or upgraded co-working and communication software, tools and devices has also surged and will continue to grow given as COVID-19 restrictions persist and digitalisation of economies and societies accelerates.

1.4 Statistics on youth: trends and methodological issues

Sound evidence to back up policy choices, monitoring and evaluation are crucial for performance-based policy making. The availability and reliability of quantitative and qualitative evidence has improved in all countries of the region. Such advances may help the expansion and, in certain cases, the refinement of instruments and tools to aid in shaping evidence-based policy choices focused on education and training, young people's transition from school to work, their integration into the labour market, and poverty reduction.

All SEET countries have made substantial efforts to harmonise their statistical instruments and practices with international and European standards. Regular labour force surveys that are harmonised with the EU standards are conducted in all countries. Data on young people's labour market status, education participation and attainment in Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey are available on the website of the EU's statistics agency, Eurostat.

Apart from household surveys such as labour force surveys, administrative data on education and the labour market have also evolved over recent years. All the SEET countries take part in OECD-PISA. All except Kosovo also took part in the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study. This allows for comparison and benchmarking of information on young people's skills and complements the information gathered on education and the labour market.

The SEET countries have invested in developing new processes of data collection, analysis and interpretation, and have striven to improve their interinstitutional cooperation to match the supply and demand of skills and assess the effectiveness of education or employment policies. However, they still need to consolidate their mechanisms for identifying and matching skills needs (ETF, 2018).

Tracking upper secondary and tertiary graduates is one of the fundamental tools for ensuring the quality of education and vocational training and the relevance of skills to socioeconomic demands. The SEET countries are currently at different levels of development, usage and institutionalisation of graduate tracking systems. Systematic tracer studies of VET graduates were first conducted in SEET

in 2016. Turkey was the first to start tracking the performance of its VET graduates in the labour market when the Ministry of National Education introduced the E-graduate system in 2007. More recently, the Western Balkans countries have taken steps towards establishing mechanisms for the collection of data on VET graduates, mostly reliant on EU financing or donor support. The ILO has carried out several surveys of labour market transition among youth: in North Macedonia (2012, published 2013), Serbia and Montenegro (both conducted in 2015 and published in 2016).

2. ENTREPRENEURIAL ASPECTS OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

In the context of high youth unemployment, economic crises and rapid changes linked to a complex knowledge-based economy and society, transversal skills, particularly entrepreneurship, are essential if young people are to become active, creative and entrepreneurial citizens (European Commission et al., 2016). This applies to the countries of the SEET region as well. The twenty-first-century economy needs a more entrepreneurial workforce that can generate innovation, create jobs and boost economic growth. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) study 2018/2019 demonstrates the important impact entrepreneurs have across the world by introducing innovations into their societies, creating jobs, competing globally, and contributing to the emergence and growth of industries⁶.

This chapter looks at the extent to which entrepreneurship competences are promoted among young people in the SEET region, in formal and non-formal education and training. Most of the findings are based on the national Torino Process reports and on the results of the Small Business Act (SBA) assessment carried out in the Western Balkans and Turkey⁷. The OECD, the European Commission, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the ETF regularly run these assessments of countries' progress in implementing the principles of the SBA, measuring progress against an assessment framework (SME Policy Index assessment framework) via a scoring system.

2.1 Entrepreneurial learning and entrepreneurship in the SEET region

Education and training play a key role in building a more entrepreneurial society. Studies have shown that entrepreneurship education has a positive association with individuals' entrepreneurial efficacy, that is, their self-confidence in performing entrepreneurial activities. University graduates who have undertaken entrepreneurship education and started their own business have a significantly higher growth in productivity, which demonstrates the highly competitive capacity of their businesses (Moberg et al., 2015). However, the focus group discussions that took place for the SBA assessment suggest that in most countries of the SEET region, young people prefer a professional career in the public sector or as an employee in the private sector rather than becoming an entrepreneur.

Entrepreneurship education must be set in a lifelong learning perspective and should be offered in both initial and continuing education and training. Initial education needs to create the right conditions for developing an entrepreneurial mindset and equipping students with skills to start a business. This is particularly important for VET graduates. A more in-depth reflection on entrepreneurial learning in VET is therefore needed. While continuing training should be made available for entrepreneurs and employees from micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs).

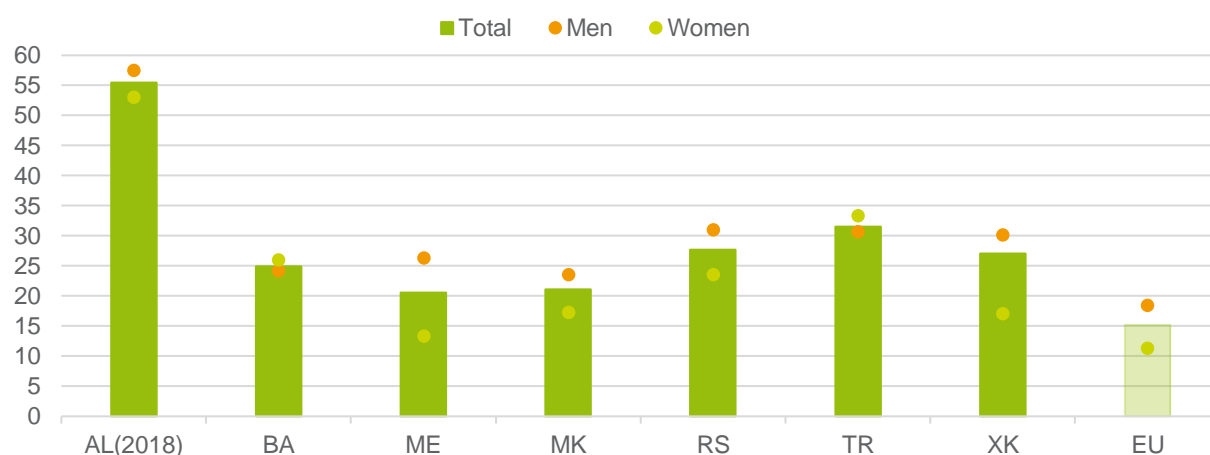
This is particularly relevant in the SEET region where, in 2017, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) made up 99.7% of all enterprises, ranging from 99.1% in Bosnia and Herzegovina to 99.9% in Kosovo. Micro enterprises make up by far the largest share. They accounted for 90.4% of all enterprises in the region on average in 2017, ranging from 87.9% in Albania to 96.2% in Serbia, as revealed by the latest SBA assessment in the region.

⁶ www.gemconsortium.org/report/gem-2018-2019-global-report

⁷ www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/sme-policy-index-western-balkans-and-turkey-2019-assessing

Entrepreneurship education is also relevant from an employment perspective since, in 2019, the proportion of self-employed people to the total employed population in SEET exceeded the EU average of 15.2%, reaching its highest level in Albania (55.5%) and its lowest in Montenegro (around 21%). This share has remained stable over the past decade. In all countries but Turkey, men are more likely than women to be self-employed – although this may be a statistical artefact concerning self-employed activities in agriculture, in which men are often counted as self-employed while women tend to be considered unpaid family members. In many SEET countries, as well as in several EU Member States, the high incidence of self-employment reflects underemployment particularly in the agriculture sector, where self-employed and unpaid family workers are common in small farms and rural households. Incidences of self-employment as a percentage of total employment have been dwindling as the economies progress towards more service-oriented activities and less fragmented agriculture. Nevertheless, the potential for high self-employment remains, given the newly emerging forms of work, such as platform work.

FIGURE 2.1 INCIDENCE OF SELF-EMPLOYMENT (% AGED 15+), 2019



Source: ETF database; Eurostat.

Young people need to be more innovative and adaptable in the fast-changing world of work, and education and training play a critical role in developing a more entrepreneurial culture and mindset among them. Nowadays, employers increasingly seek young, entrepreneurial people who can take initiatives and create innovation in the workplace.

According to the Council regulation on key competences, competence in entrepreneurship refers to 'the capacity to act upon opportunities and ideas, and to transform them into values for others. It is founded upon creativity, critical thinking and problem solving, taking initiative and perseverance and the ability to work collaboratively in order to plan and manage projects that are of cultural, social or financial value' (Council of the European Union, 2018).

Therefore, entrepreneurship education should extend beyond providing pure business skills training (e.g. business plans, leadership, marketing, financial management). Entrepreneurship is to be considered as a key competence – the combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes young people should build if they are to achieve a successful career, as either entrepreneur or employee, and for their own personal development in everyday life. In this respect, the EU has developed the European

Competence Framework (EntreComp)⁸. EntreComp identifies and describes the elements that make someone entrepreneurial, in order to establish a common reference for initiatives dealing with entrepreneurial learning. Some of the countries in the region, such as Montenegro, have been using EntreComp in reforming their curricula.

In addition to education and training in promoting entrepreneurship, it is important to consolidate the overall entrepreneurial ecosystem and support mechanisms, such as cutting red tape for business, smart procurement or tax incentives, alongside the provision of mentoring and coaching.

2.2 Developing a more entrepreneurial culture: state of play

Entrepreneurial learning policies

The term ‘entrepreneurial learning’ refers to all forms and methods of entrepreneurship promotion through education and training. It covers all activities provided in schools or universities (e.g. courses, business games, mini companies) and outside the normal school environment (e.g. youth entrepreneurship clubs, incubators).

During recent years, all the countries in the SEET region have shown a clear policy commitment to promoting entrepreneurial learning within a lifelong learning perspective, either through separate entrepreneurial learning strategies, as is the case for Bosnia and Herzegovina⁹, Montenegro¹⁰ and North Macedonia¹¹, or as an integral part of wider policy instruments: employment and lifelong learning strategies in Turkey, the government work programme in Serbia, education strategies or frameworks in Albania and Kosovo.

There is no ‘one size fits all’ approach, and each government should decide whether to opt for a separate entrepreneurial learning strategy or for a more integrated approach towards promoting entrepreneurial learning, or a combination of both. Entrepreneurial learning has no single policy home, and strategies should connect economic, employment, innovation, youth and education issues. Therefore, a structured coordination and cooperation in the form of multi-stakeholder partnerships is necessary to ensure consistency, efficiency and proper implementation of actions promoting entrepreneurial learning. The National Partnership for Entrepreneurial Learning in Montenegro, for example, has been identified as a good practice in driving the entrepreneurial learning agenda forward at national level. It played a major role in raising awareness of entrepreneurship education and training (formal and non-formal), improving the quality of entrepreneurship education, providing advice to policy makers based on existing good practices, enhancing cooperation with the businesses, etc. The National Partnership started work in 2013 as a non-formal body. With the adoption of the new entrepreneurial learning strategy foreseen in 2020, a new governmental coordinating body to promote entrepreneurial learning should be created and an electronic platform set up.

As part of their education reforms, all the countries are moving or have moved towards a competence-based curriculum. Based on the latest SBA assessment results (OECD et al., 2019), all the countries

⁸ <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/entrecomp>

⁹ The country’s entrepreneurial learning strategy 2012–2015 has expired. The policy focus group in 2018 recommended that the strategy should be updated.

¹⁰ A new strategy for lifelong entrepreneurial learning (2020–2024) has been developed and is awaiting adoption by the government.

¹¹ The country’s entrepreneurial strategy and action plan expire in 2020.

have started to integrate aspects of entrepreneurship competences into their curriculum frameworks, at different levels of education. The practical approaches differ from country to country, ranging from separate entrepreneurship and business skills subjects to cross-curricular approaches where entrepreneurial learning should, in principle, be integrated in all school subjects.

Entrepreneurial learning requires innovative ways of teaching in which real-life learning experiences and project-based learning are proven to be efficient ways to develop an entrepreneurial mindset amongst young people. It is very important that all the countries continue to invest in the training of teachers (pre-service and in-service teacher training) and to develop an entrepreneurial way of thinking among teachers. This can be encouraged by integrating short work placements for teachers into companies as part of their continuous professional development. In Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Turkey, guidelines for teachers are prepared at the national level. These include teaching or learning materials for teachers on how to implement entrepreneurship as a key competence in the classrooms. In Montenegro, a platform exists for teachers to exchange examples of good practice in entrepreneurial learning at regional and national levels. The assessment of key competences related to entrepreneurship is still underdeveloped, as is also the case for many Member States of the EU (European Commission et al., 2016).

Regarding entrepreneurial learning outside the formal education system, all countries in the region are supporting people in starting their own businesses. According to the latest SBA report, all the governments have included business support services (BSSs) in their SME policy frameworks and have invested significant financial resources to them. BSSs include the provision of general information (e.g. on legislation on starting a business, how to develop a business plan) and training, mentoring and technical services for SME entrepreneurs.

For example, Montenegro's MSME Strategy 2018–2022 promotes entrepreneurship for youth, women and social enterprises, including training, mentoring and counselling. Albania's Business Investment Development Strategy 2014–2020 has an action plan which includes training about 2 000 young potential entrepreneurs in how to start a business, by the end of 2020. Unfortunately, the uptake of support services is still very low in most of the countries. It is important to monitor and evaluate the delivery of training and mentoring programmes systematically, and to measure the programmes' quality and impact in terms of how many businesses have been created, their sustainability and their growth potential. Only Serbia and Turkey collect comprehensive feedback from SMEs on the effectiveness and quality of public business support services.

All the countries offer general entrepreneurship programmes, and some have developed training programmes aimed at specific target groups, such as youth (aged under 30), women and migrants. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina a youth employment programme fostering entrepreneurship among young people was launched in 2019. It included a co-financing mechanism for start-up entrepreneurs, who received a monthly sum of BAM 420 for a period of 12 months.

Social entrepreneurship is still a relatively new policy area in the region, but it is gaining momentum. Often social enterprises are not eligible for business support schemes because of their legal form or because they do not meet other business-related criteria (NESsT, 2017). Albania and Kosovo have a law on social enterprises in place in order to provide a clear definition and some committed public resources for supporting the sector. According to Serbia's Economic Reform Programme 2020–2022, the framework for social entrepreneurship and labour integration in social enterprises is under preparation. In Turkey, the law does not provide for a separate legal entity for social enterprises;

however, existing social enterprises are registered using one of the available legal forms (e.g. as cooperatives, limited liability companies, sole traders, associations or foundations)¹².

Entrepreneurial learning in schools and universities

At lower and upper secondary level, including VET, there are many good examples of how young people develop their entrepreneurship skills, through real-life projects with companies, creating mini-companies or virtual firms, inviting successful entrepreneurs as role models, entrepreneurial clubs, and similar activities. One example in this respect is Serbia's Chemical Technology School in Subotica, selected as a good practice by the ETF in 2018. The school was recognised for its good efforts in promoting entrepreneurship as a key competence in the awards for VET excellence at the European Vocational Skills Week 2018.

Entrepreneurial learning activities in schools also take place through practical learning in and with the business community. In VET, there is a systematic and structured cooperation with business through apprenticeships, internships and/or work-based learning approaches. However, these work placements are primarily focused on occupational skills and less on the business or administrative aspects of the company. In general education, cooperation with the business community is still ad hoc and depends on the goodwill of teachers or school directors.

In higher education, entrepreneurship courses are embedded in the curricula and many extracurricular entrepreneurial learning initiatives exist, e.g. business games, competitions for best business ideas, participation in the World Skills competition¹³. However, it is mostly students from economic and technology faculties who participate in those initiatives. In general, universities still apply the narrow approach to entrepreneurship education and focus less on developing entrepreneurship as a key competence for personal and professional purposes.

Parents and career guidance coaches at schools and universities play an important role in promoting entrepreneurship as a possible career option, especially for those students who show interest and have succeeded well in business games, virtual companies, and related activities.

Entrepreneurial learning outside the education system

In the region, a wide range of public and private institutions provide training for start-ups, including employment agencies, chambers of commerce, SME development agencies, private training providers, business incubators and accelerators. Some countries have created specific funds to support start-ups financially, for instance the Fund for Innovation and Technology Development in Kosovo, or the Investment and Development Fund in Montenegro.

Several examples of specific youth entrepreneurship training programmes are offered. In Serbia, the Youth Caravan project financed by the Serbian Development Agency gives young people legal advice and support towards developing a business plan. In Turkey, youth start-ups can benefit from the Individual Young Entrepreneurs Support organised by the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK).

¹² www.britishcouncil.org/tr/en/programmes/education/social-enterprise-research

¹³ <https://worldskills.org/>

However, a training course on its own will not lead to business success and sustainability. To enhance long-term business sustainability, integrated support services for start-ups should be offered, combining training courses with coaching, mentoring and financial support such as grants, tax reduction or training vouchers. Young entrepreneurs learn from each other and from more experienced entrepreneurs. Networking is an efficient way of learning, allowing entrepreneurs to discuss common start-up challenges, share business ideas, find potential partners and investors. Evidence shows that co-working spaces, where start-up entrepreneurs work in the same room, stimulate informal learning and are a good way of networking for start-ups.

The role of youth workers and organisations that work with youth in promoting entrepreneurial learning is very important. However, entrepreneurial learning is not the primary focus of youth work activities. For youth-centred organisations to boost that focus, it would be necessary to increase the skills and competences of youth workers in the entrepreneurship field and to raise awareness of what entrepreneurial competences really mean (European Commission, 2017).

Driving forward the entrepreneurial agenda in SEET

According to the latest SBA assessment, the survival rates of business start-ups in the region are low, as is the case in the EU. The survival rate in North Macedonia is slightly higher than the EU average (52.6% in 2014), while those for Kosovo (63.4% in 2014) and Turkey (66.6% in 2015) place them near the top performers in the EU (Eurostat, 2018). The impact of the COVID-19 crisis will most probably worsen the position of MSMEs, particularly start-ups and micro enterprises, in the market. All national governments in the SEET region are taking measures to help SMEs to address their cash-flow problems, for example by providing guarantees on loans, direct lending, grants and subsidies, and by deferral of payments such as income tax, social security and utility bills¹⁴. In addition, many international organisations are doing their part to complement these national measures. According to the same source, the EU is mobilising millions of euros to support the social and economic recovery of the SEET region, while the EBRD has boosted its financial support through the so-called Solidarity Package¹⁵.

The COVID-19 pandemic has already transmuted into an economic and labour market shock, impacting not only on supply (production of goods and services) but also demand (consumption and investment). All businesses, regardless of size, are facing serious challenges, especially those in the aviation, tourism and hospitality industries, with a real threat of significant declines in revenue, insolvencies and job losses in specific sectors. Available empirical evidence on how the COVID-19 crisis has affected SMEs in South Eastern Europe in general is still limited; however, based on emerging evidence from the OECD countries, it can be extrapolated that SMEs in the region will also face severe losses in revenues and will have limited financial resources to withstand a long-lasting crisis¹⁶. Sustaining business operations will be particularly difficult for SMEs. The negative impact on young workers and small business owners in SEET countries is likely to be significant, and more acute for young people than for adults, as it was during the 2008 global financial collapse, which exposed the vulnerability of the youth labour market.

¹⁴ https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=129_129649-tclugxbw4j&title=COVID-19-Crisis-Response-in-South-East-European-Economies

¹⁵ www.ebrd.com/news/2020/ebd-targets-coronavirus-financing-of-21-billion-through-2021.html

¹⁶ https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=129_129649-tclugxbw4j&title=COVID-19-Crisis-Response-in-South-East-European-Economies

Although the current COVID-19 crisis will have an enormous impact on SMEs, at the same time it demonstrates the value of the entrepreneurial capacity and innovativeness of many SMEs and the importance of the ecosystems in which they operate¹⁷. In the SEET region, there are several examples of start-ups that have managed to scale up their business during the pandemic. In Kosovo¹⁸, for example, Formon, a company in Pristina that manufactures desktop 3D printers, has created a new innovative product, an open-source ventilator of which half the parts are 3D-printed. This product will help people with respiratory problems, and when it is fully approved by medical experts the company can start with serial production.

Supporting start-ups on their entrepreneurial journey is essential to increasing their sustainability. Start-up training, when adapted to their needs, makes entrepreneurs better prepared and gives them more confidence to succeed and to grow their business. Growing businesses are more likely to create jobs (ETF/Van den Eynde, 2019).

All the SEET countries do recognise the importance of building a more entrepreneurial mindset amongst youth and promoting entrepreneurship to increase competitiveness, innovation and economic growth. Entrepreneurship as a key competence should become part of their national education systems, across all levels of education and within a lifelong learning context. EntreComp provides an important reference for policy makers, schools and the teaching profession in ensuring that schools and universities play their role in building the next entrepreneurial generation.

During the COVID-19 crisis, the importance of combining entrepreneurship and digital skills and competences amongst employers, employees and entrepreneurs has become more apparent. The crisis has forced businesses to think about new ways of working, creating new products or services which require a combination of strong entrepreneurial and digital skills and competences.

The SEET countries need to invest in young people as a specific target group for entrepreneurship support programmes. To improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public and private training provision, start-up training should be targeted more closely at the specific needs of young entrepreneurs and where they are on their entrepreneurial journey.

Policy makers should pay attention to the different categories of entrepreneur when allocating resources: from the ‘wannabe’ entrepreneurs who need help with their business idea to the early-phase start-ups that need support to make their business sustainable, and the ‘up-starts’ that need a push to scale up their business.

Because entrepreneurs learn from their peers and from other successful entrepreneurs, the countries should promote peer-to-peer learning events and organise national and international networking events and competitions, e.g. ‘best business idea’, ‘best start-up of the year’ (ETF/Van den Eynde, 2019).

Importantly, youth entrepreneurship support programmes that are being implemented need to be monitored and evaluated better and their impact on the sustainability of businesses measured. The collection of data on the number of start-ups and their sustainability is a challenge for all countries.

¹⁷ https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=119_119680-di6h3qgi4x&title=Covid-19_SME_Policy_Responses

¹⁸ <https://lickosovo.com/news/post/kosovos-ict-community-responds-to-coronavirus-how-far-weve-come>

Finally, all countries are encouraged to make more use of the existing EU programmes that support young entrepreneurs and small businesses in developing their entrepreneurship skills. There are many EU initiatives supporting entrepreneurs and SMEs which also apply to SEET countries. The Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs exchange programme helps aspiring entrepreneurs to develop the necessary skills to start a new business or run a small business successfully in Europe¹⁹. New entrepreneurs gather and exchange knowledge and business ideas with an experienced entrepreneur, with whom they stay and collaborate for a period of one to six months. COSME, the EU programme for the competitiveness of SMEs, helps SMEs to become more competitive by facilitating access to finance, supporting access to international markets, creating a favourable policy environment, and encouraging an entrepreneurial culture²⁰. The latter may include mobility exchanges, research, diffusion of best practices, and pilot projects in areas such as entrepreneurship education, mentoring, or the development of guidance and support services for new and potential entrepreneurs, including young, female, and senior entrepreneurs. The European Enterprise Network (EEN) helps businesses innovate and grow on an international scale²¹. It is the world's largest support network for SMEs with international ambitions, and is active in more than 60 countries worldwide, including in most SEET countries.

¹⁹ www.erasmus-entrepreneurs.eu

²⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/cosme_en

²¹ <https://een.ec.europa.eu/>

3. SOCIAL INCLUSION AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Over recent decades, SEET countries have sought to put more emphasis on the skills agenda for social inclusion and cohesion. Big efforts have been made to modernise their education systems in general and VET systems in particular. However, many national, EU and international assessments point out that their main focus has been on adapting their education systems to the needs of their emerging market economies. Within the framework of the EU accession process, the policy agenda for VET policies has been strongly influenced by a range of EU, international, regional and domestic policy entrepreneurs (Bartlett and Cino Pagliarello, 2016). The ETF's analysis *South Eastern Europe, Israel and Turkey: Trends, perspectives and challenges in strengthening vocational education for social inclusion and social cohesion*, points out that the modernisation of VET systems has occurred in line with EU goals and objectives for VET as part of the EU accession process (Bartlett et al., 2014). However, policy and implementation orientations vary between those that emphasise social inclusion for cohesion and those that focus on adjustment to the labour market. Progress has been rather slow in terms of implementation in both cases.

By examining the policy process regarding skills in the SEET region, in the context of the current COVID-19 impact, this chapter argues that national policies have been strongly oriented towards the promotion of employability and the adaptation of skills systems to labour market needs, rather than to policies designed to overcome social exclusion and discrimination for cohesive societies. Among the factors driving this economic view of skills provision, we emphasise the impact of various global, regional and domestic trends and the roles those trends play in hindering inclusive education and training systems that would place social inclusion for cohesion higher up on the countries' skills agenda.

3.1 Global and regional social context: old and new challenges

New, polarised situations have emerged around the world, coupled with the breakdown or poor performance of social welfare systems and traditional social safety. Divisions marked by geography, ethnicity, gender and age are accompanied by deepening income and social disparities, creating various forms of deprivation and segregation, including inequities in access, quality and participation in education, training and employment. Some countries are having difficulties in coping with global competition and generating wellbeing for individuals, groups and the population at large, resulting in an erosion of social fabric and social capital that poses threats to the shared values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination. Recent developments such as technological advances, the knowledge society, globalisation and regional integration, coupled with demographic shifts, environmental destruction, zones of armed conflict and social rifts, will have major implications for skills development in the coming years. All these come at a time of rising income inequality, mounting social and political tensions, and a general feeling of uncertainty about the future.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education is likely to be most devastating in countries with already low learning outcomes, high dropout rates, and low resilience to shocks. The outbreak of the virus and lockdowns at the national level could be used as a good test for education technology interventions enabling distance learning. SEET countries are no exception to this trend.

According to an ILO report, world youth unemployment increased by 7.8 million between 2007 and 2009. During the economic crisis, the global youth unemployment rate, which had been declining before its onset, rose sharply from 11.9% to 13%²². The reasons why youth were disproportionately hit in 2008 are, in many ways, the same as those for which they are likely to be disproportionately affected by coronavirus now. Young people tend to work in seasonal, temporary, and/or insecure or informal work, and they are more likely to be on contract or part-time jobs without health benefits or paid leave, which means that they are more likely to be laid off, see their hours cut, or suffer longer-term unemployment. Many entry-level or lower-skilled jobs that employ youth are in retail and services (including hospitality, food, and beverages) – industries that are highly susceptible to a sudden drop in consumer spending. In the case of COVID-19, the combination of a decrease in spending and the eschewing of public places and activities is particularly problematic for the availability and stability of youth jobs and their small business profitability.

The adverse impacts of school closures are difficult to overstate, and many of them extend beyond the education and training sector. Unequal access to digital learning portals and lack of access to technology or good internet connectivity are obstacles to continued learning, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those living in more remote areas. The disadvantages are disproportionate for underprivileged learners who tend to have fewer educational opportunities outside school. There will likely be a rise in dropout rates. It will be a challenge to ensure children and youth return to school and stay when schools reopen, especially after protracted closures. Social isolation will be a significant issue for all, especially for disadvantaged youth. Schools are hubs of social activity and human interaction; when schools close, many young people miss out on the social contact that is essential to their learning and development.

It is more and more evident that the pandemic will lower asset prices, depressing the financial capital that fuels growth, and threatening business activity and in many cases business viability; all these things will cause physical capital to be paused or scrapped. However, we need to focus also on social capital. As in past pandemics, one source of capital is bucking these trends: social capital. The term typically refers to the network of relationships across communities that support and strengthen societies. From surveys, we know that people greatly value these networks, even though social capital itself is rarely assigned a monetary value. The social distancing policies to curb the spread of COVID-19 enacted across the world, including the SEET region, might have been expected to weaken social networks and damage social capital. In fact, the opposite has happened. People have maintained physical distance while pursuing social togetherness. Existing networks have been strengthened and new ones created, often digitally. Even as other capital has crumbled, the stock of social capital has risen, acting as a counter-cyclical stabiliser across communities.

As discussed above, it is imperative to pause for reflection, to take stock, and to look ahead at how skills can be an integral part of the social inclusion of youth in education, training and the labour market – but not only these. If the policy declarations, state policies, and measures for the economic and social inclusion of youth for cohesion are to be effective, then it is important to understand the causes of the social exclusion of youth in SEET within the wider global context.

²² www.ilo.org/empelm/pubs/WCMS_143349/lang--en/index.htm

3.2 Social inclusion and cohesion

The World Economic Forum's *Global social mobility report 2020* (WEF, 2020) is based on a methodology integrating the latest statistics from international organisations and a survey of executives²³. This report provides a much-needed assessment of the current state of the paths to social mobility around the world and analyses the countries' performance on five key dimensions of social mobility distributed over ten pillars, all of them key to issues of education and training and employment for social inclusion and cohesion:

1. health,
2. education (access, quality and equity, lifelong learning),
3. technology,
4. work (opportunities, wages, conditions),
5. protection and institutions (social protection and inclusive institutions).

Economies with greater social mobility provide more equally shared opportunities – namely, on an equal and meritocratic footing irrespective of socioeconomic background, geographic location, gender or origin. There is a direct and linear relationship between a country's income inequality and its social mobility score on the index. Low social mobility entrenches historical inequalities, and higher income inequalities fuel lower social mobility. Enhancing social mobility can convert this vicious cycle into a virtuous one and has positive benefits for broader economic growth.

Alongside the great benefits and challenges of technological developments, concerns emerge. For instance, many jobs will disappear due to automation, computers and machines making obsolete many occupational skills that VET systems provide at present. New technologies destroy jobs in some industries, especially among the low-skilled, while creating other jobs, often in different industries and requiring different skills. These factors suggest an association of technology with unemployment and social distress. However, technology per se is not the culprit. Its economy-wide impact on employment is likely to be positive, provided that the mechanisms for translating technology into jobs are not impaired by deficiencies in education, training and innovation systems and rigidities in products, labour markets and social welfare systems.

As discussed in the 2019 Human Development Report (UNDP, 2019), inequality cannot be framed around economics only ('making money is the most important thing in life'). There is another thread that explains the exclusion of youth from many spheres of socioeconomic life. A new gap has opened in areas such as tertiary education and access to broadband – opportunities once considered luxuries that are now considered critical to competing and belonging, particularly in a knowledge economy, where an increasing number of young people are educated and connected but stuck with no ladder of choices to enable them to move up. At the same time, climate change, gender inequality and violent conflict continue to drive and entrench basic and new inequalities alike. The COVID-19 pandemic is another reminder of the fragility of our societies' public policies.

There is a need for integrated policies to prevent inequalities that can follow the life cycle: from pre–labour market investments in the health and nutrition of young children to in– and post–labour market

²³ www.weforum.org/reports/global-social-mobility-index-2020-why-economies-benefit-from-fixing-inequality; Solt, 2019

investments around access to capital, minimum wages and social services. Politicians and policy makers have a battery of choices that, if correctly combined to suit the context of each country or group, could translate into a lifelong investment in equality and sustainability. Making those choices starts with a commitment to tackling the complexity of human development – to pushing the boundaries to help countries and communities realise the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). All the SEET countries have signed up to the SDGs including the ones for education and training for employment.

A European perspective and gradual integration into the EU have been key elements of the political and economic development in all EU candidate and potential candidate countries for over a decade. Youth Work makes an important contribution to the European integration process by fostering their active engagement in education and training, employment, society, civic education, participation in democratic processes, and contributing to the development of policies around youth. In 2010, the EU Member States endorsed the Europe 2020 strategy for growth, which will be not only smart and sustainable but also inclusive. One of the Europe 2020 flagship initiatives is the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion. It states that poverty should be combatted from an early age, as children born into poverty face a substantially higher risk of remaining poor throughout their youth and into adulthood²⁴.

The definition of social inclusion has changed over the years, reflecting the values prevalent at different times and in different contexts. The EU considers that social inclusion and social protection are interlinked. Social inclusion was one of the eight fields of action in the EU Youth Strategy 2010–2018. The European Pillar of Social Rights, another important instrument, focuses on equal opportunities and access to labour markets, fair working conditions and social protection and social inclusion. As indicated in article 14 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and in the European Pillar of Social Rights, everyone in the EU has the right to good-quality, inclusive education and training. Everyone, regardless of economic, social, cultural, geographical or migrant background, state of health or disability, or learning difficulties, should have the opportunity to acquire and maintain the knowledge, competences and skills enabling a full participation in society, and to manage transitions in the labour market successfully. The new youth strategy, running from 2019 to 2027, keeps a strong focus on inclusive goals²⁵.

The right and access to inclusive education and training are key to building inclusive and cohesive societies. The SEET countries share a common and increasing concern about the role of education and training in supporting social inclusion and social cohesion and in providing equality of opportunity for youth from all social groups within society. The ETF has been monitoring the countries' policies and practices on skills for economic and social inclusion, aiming at social cohesion. Several ETF studies have emphasised how educational deficits, underachievement and skills gaps among vulnerable groups are both a cause and an effect of unemployment, low incomes and other multiple deprivations and social exclusion (Bartlett et al., 2014; ETF, 2019c). There is serious concern about the social inclusion of young people (aged 16–29) at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU,

²⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=751&langId=en>

²⁵ <https://youthforeurope.eu/european-youth-goals-2019-2027/>

including the SEET countries. This concern is well monitored and evidenced²⁶. Commendable efforts have been carried out; however, much more is needed in order to complete this ‘unfinished’ task.

3.3 Skills matter

This section aims to flag up some of the new and persistent substantive challenges faced by young people in the SEET region. There is a plethora of research studies which aim to understand and predict better the impact of all the recent developments and the skills needed to confront them. The world of education is heading in an unpredictable direction. New technologies, especially pattern-recognition software, commonly referred to as artificial intelligence, are descending upon the learning process, changing how we retain and test knowledge. Improving access to education opportunities throughout an individual’s life is a critical factor for all economies. Education is a powerful ‘equaliser’ of chances. Ensuring that individuals have equal opportunities to access good quality schools is essential to reviving social mobility. In addition to a new focus on the availability, quality and distribution of education programmes aimed at disadvantaged children and youth, there is an urgent need for a wholly new agenda around promoting and financing skills development throughout workers’ careers, in order to address technology-driven disruption to jobs and skills. Forging a new social contract that provides adequate social protection beyond full-time employment contracts is important across economies. In addition to existing self-employment, as globalisation and digitalisation continue to reshape work, workers and employers are entering more flexible work relationships. A new policy agenda aimed at creating holistic protections and support for all individuals irrespective of their status in employment is urgently needed. Businesses must be core stakeholders in the efforts regarding social mobility for their own employees, workers in their value chains and their broader communities (WEF, 2020).

Inclusive education and training have been high on the policy agenda in recent years. There have been two main interpretations of the concept of inclusion in the field of education and training. One has focused on the inclusion of students with special educational needs (disability or learning impairment) in mainstream schooling rather than in special schools that isolate such students. The other has been the idea of education for all, meaning that there should be no discrimination between children of different social backgrounds and that the education system should not perpetuate or accentuate the inequalities in society. In this paper we take the latter view, while also being aware that children with special educational needs should have their needs met appropriately in mainstream school systems.

Social exclusion at an early age can potentially have long-lasting consequences for both individuals and society, as it may affect all aspects of young people’s lives. Data suggest that the decision to move towards an independent life, leaving the parental household, increases the risk of poverty. For many young people, looking for a job and sustaining a household are far from easy. Indeed, young people often start with low-paid jobs and underemployment (temporary or part-time work), which can lead to financial difficulties. However, this is not always the rule; the risk of poverty for youth depends on numerous other factors, including the general financial situation and the social inclusion policies where they live.

²⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Young_people_-_social_inclusion#Young_people_at_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion

The situation of youth poverty and exclusion in the Western Balkan and Turkey cannot be seen in isolation from what is happening globally. It cannot be analysed unless all the internal and external factors are taken into consideration.

3.4 Skills for inclusion – good on paper but not reality

Different combinations of employment and skills policies to counter mismatches of skills for social cohesion and inclusive growth more effectively remain a big challenge in all the SEET countries. They all face important challenges in terms of economic and social development: low growth or jobless growth, high levels of unemployment especially among youth, low involvement of women in economic activities, and a high proportion of disengaged young people (NEETs). Even if at different stages and paces, the ETF's partner countries report a growing shortage of young people equipped with the knowledge and skills needed for the economy of the 21st century.

The potential of vocational training to support or even drive competitiveness, innovation and growth policies has largely been neglected in education and training policies, when compared with the role attributed to the higher education sector. The Torino Process 2018–20 analysis reiterates this conclusion (ETF, 2019c). This neglect is harmful because it underestimates the crucial importance of widely available and high-quality VET for both low-skilled and high-skilled occupations, which is necessary for maintaining and developing the economy and for inclusive growth that increases social cohesion. To realise the full potential of their young people and benefit fully from the technological changes in improving economy-wide productivity, growth and job creation, SEET governments and stakeholders need to address ways of making policies and practices around skills part of their innovation and technology diffusion policies, as an integral part of overall economic and social policy.

Social inclusion goes hand in hand with economic development, and neither should exclude or progress at the cost of the other. As it has been shown, the pursuit of economic growth alone cannot bring about societal gains and reduce poverty. Indeed, societies that show the highest economic growth are not necessarily the most inclusive ones. *The Inclusive Development Index 2018* (WEF, 2018) shows that while the GDP of advanced economies grew by 5.3% on average between 2012 and 2016, inclusion grew by only 0.01% and intergenerational equity by only 0.66%. Focusing on GDP as a goal and indicator is fuelling short-termism and inequality.

Based on the ETF's analysis of various literature and country developments, we highlight that VET has a potential for making multidimensional contributions:

1. **the skills dimension**, by providing skills for employability in a lifelong learning perspective, thus enhancing economic inclusion in the labour market and society. This dimension is very important but has been over-researched and overexposed in the literature, to the extent that it tends to dominate the public discourse about VET and social inclusion and to give rise to narrower or reductive approaches and policy measures. It therefore needs to be counterbalanced or complemented by broader considerations anchored in the civic, social and cultural roles of VET. Furthermore, this function of VET is often prone to stereotyping (gender and others) and cultural biases, leading to stigmatisation, as well as to differentiated and separated institutional and/or curricular provision, which have an adverse impact on social cohesion;
2. **the social mobility dimension**, by enhancing participation in education and reducing educational inequalities. VET thus helps to diminish social inequalities and improve the social mobility potential of less advantaged students. While this function of VET is more feasible and realistic for

marginalised learners, its viability for middle-class learners tends to be enhanced if VET provides pathways for progression towards tertiary education;

3. **the socialisation dimension**, through the development of a sense of professional identity and of belonging to a professional community, while also internalising the respective professional values, standards and ethics;
4. **the civic dimension**, by developing knowledge and skills for accessing and participating in the labour market. VET also promotes trust in social institutions, institutional integrity, and solidarity, as well as individual willingness to build, participate in, and sustain communities. Thus, VET prepares learners for a pro-social way of life and behaviour and for active citizenship;
5. **the equity dimension**, by opening learning pathways for disadvantaged and marginalised individuals and groups in society and helping young people to take responsibility for their own lives.

In the equity dimension we notice two modalities or approaches, however: first, a preventive one, aiming to establish inclusive and equitable provision early on, in pre-vocational and initial vocational education, thus preventing the exclusion of learners; second, a corrective approach that addresses existing exclusion starting from VET and VET inequalities. The notions of 'disadvantage' and 'target groups' have heavily influenced the corrective approach. Isolated cases are reported in favour of a 'tailoring' approach which integrates all the dimensions listed above.

The role of VET in actions for social inclusion and cohesion is not only at the heart of the cohesion policy for inclusive growth and jobs; it also forms the backbone of the skills agenda policy discourse and actions at national and local level. Within these contexts, the countries' education and training systems are pressured to provide not only skills for employment but to ensure that young people acquire key competences by promoting democratic values and fundamental rights, social inclusion and non-discrimination, as well as active citizenship. To adapt to new life situations and career shifts, manage change, take initiative and risk, innovate and engage in further learning, purely job-related skills are not enough. VET learners also require key competences and skills through initial and continuing VET. The need to strengthen transversal skills and key competences is mentioned sporadically in policy documents and has not yet been addressed in a comprehensive approach.

VET should be 'smarter', should cater to the provision of skills for innovation, and should drive competitiveness. Skills provision should be anchored in each country's specific socioeconomic potential and its innovation drive for skills for employment. In its work on local skills, entrepreneurial communities and smart territories, the ETF argues that each country and its regions have unique potential (ETF, 2016). It is at that level that VET for social inclusion and cohesion should be addressed by broadening dialogue to include actors who drive innovation and have a vested interest in digging deeper into skills needs, and who overcome the temptation to analyse skills needs based on the past and move forward a common vision and participation. Enhancing the inclusiveness of growth is a long-term process that requires long-lasting commitments across a multitude of stakeholders to mobilise resources, time and effort, and who, in order to do so, increasingly require more coordinated and better information to help them identify the right decisions and prioritise actions.

3.5 Smart, sustainable and inclusive skills policy making

There cannot be any social development without economic development. Social and economic development agendas need to be pursued together and require joined-up thinking, planning and implementation both at national and local levels, putting skills for inclusive growth at the centre. This should be applied to the following:

- social dialogue: revise the social dialogue model, shift to a socioeconomic partnership model to include capacity building of private sector support organisations;
- private sector: build effective engagement, participation and contribution by willing enterprises for skills reform programmes (publicly supported, enterprise-funded);
- new skills governance structures: high-skills equilibrium (sectors, government, training providers, R&D community) and leadership (e.g. enterprise champions).

Deeper institutional and policy reforms are also required to strengthen demand-led recovery and build resilience through robust and universal social protection systems that can act as automatic economic and social stabilisers in the face of crises such as COVID-19. This will also help to rebuild trust in institutions and governments. It is critical to work jointly, building on the experience of previous outbreaks such as SARS and Ebola to support governments in understanding the options available.

After the immediate response to COVID-19 for education and training provision, it is now time to construct long-term thinking and delivery in education and training. Remote learning and education resources can mitigate loss of learning: many countries have turned to distance learning as a means of making up for lost time in school. In addition to infrastructure and connectivity, making teachers and administrators more familiar with technological tools and processes is also a key factor in providing distance learning. Accounts have been created for teachers and parents, publishers have been mobilised to make digital textbooks and learning materials available and, in some countries, national TV channels are being used to broadcast educational TV. More creativity will be needed. For instance, adapting existing platforms for use in smartphones and/or agreeing with telecoms companies to eliminate the cost of accessing material from a ministry of education site could be part of the mitigation efforts. Educational administrators and policy makers can use this crisis as an opportunity to introduce new learning modes that can reach everyone, to prepare for emergencies, and to make the system more resilient and inclusive.

Labour market inclusion is essentially the most effective enabler of social inclusion. When young people begin their working lives, they must first overcome the high unemployment rate, which is two to four times higher than that of adults in the SEET region. All too often, young people go out in search of work only to return home discouraged. The employment scenario for youth has further complications, however. When a young person eventually does find a job, it is usually an informal one, with poor working conditions, instability, low wages, and no social protection or rights. Disenfranchised and unemployed jobseekers, as well as the working poor, must be brought into decent, stable employment or self-employment which can earn them a living. Companies can contribute to improving social mobility via a set of interconnected priorities: a focus on promoting a culture of meritocracy in hiring; active participation in VET programmes; providing timely and comprehensive reskilling and upskilling curricula to employees; and paying fair wages that allow employees to meet their basic needs. A combination of technological change, economic trends and talent demand is changing income inequality outcomes in different industries.

The future of work, driven by the confluence of massive disruption to work, workforces and workplaces, has significant implications – both positive and negative – on the diversity and inclusion of workers, customers and communities. Young people, especially those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, are impacted most. Businesses must not only understand the impact of the future of work, but also reimagine the development and application of inclusion efforts (programmes, interventions and strategies) to leverage diversity as a competitive advantage to thrive in and through disruption. If given a chance to succeed, young people are more likely to participate in the workforce, pursue education, or engage in other activities that lead to economic growth. This, in turn, strengthens the youth transition process.

It is crucial that public institutions work closely with private sector organisations to engage youth representation while defining the future of skills and work strategies. Efforts must be invested into designing, delivering and financing innovative approaches to education and skills development, targeting underserved groups, to support transition into employment and reduce the likelihood of future high unemployment levels. In order to ensure that there is a place for all in the future of work, private, public, academic and non-profit organisations must work in close partnership to jointly define what the future should look like²⁷. Youth inclusiveness is one of the key characteristics of a sustainable market economy (resilient, green, inclusive, integrated, well governed and competitive).

It is imperative for the SEET countries that while they embark on the pursuit of sustainable, intelligent economic growth, the goal should be the betterment of the society, and social inclusion should therefore be strongly articulated. Policy makers can use the 2020 health crisis as an opportunity to introduce policy responses that focus on reweaving the social fabric after the crisis. Large-scale and integrated measures across all policy areas are necessary to make strong and sustained impacts on youth inclusion in education and training for employment and cohesion. Building confidence through trust and dialogue is crucial in making policy measures effective. This includes leveraging social dialogue to finetune policy packages so that they serve best those most in need. Economic and social progress can be pursued only through a three-way partnership between the private, public and social sectors. The private sector provides the innovative spark; the state provides insurance to the incomes, jobs and health of citizens; and the social sector provides the support network to cope with disruption to lives, livelihoods and human capital.

²⁷ www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/projects-and-sectors/economic-inclusion.html

4. EU YOUTH SUPPORT IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE AND TURKEY

4.1 EU policy dialogue: country and regional levels

The EU Thessaloniki Council in 2003 and the South-East Europe Cooperation Process, as well as the EU perspective for the SEET region, have enacted many political and economic reforms, including the introduction of policies concerning youth. In the annual bilateral policy dialogue between the Western Balkans-6 and the European Commission, the countries report on their annual progress. EU-Turkey relations are also governed by a bilateral policy dialogue, of which youth is a part. The annual assessment of the Economic Reform Programme and the European Commission's regular progress report are to be released in 2020.

In the Western Balkans, in 2014, a major boost regarding youth policies was given by the Berlin Process. The *Positive agenda for the youth in the Western Balkans* was adopted at the Brdo-Brijuni Process Summit in Slovenia in April 2015, and the Action Plan for Youth Work and Youth Policy was adopted in September 2016 in Ljubljana. In 2017, at the EU–Western Balkans Summit in Trieste, a section on human connectivity with a focus on youth was included in the final declaration. On that occasion the launch of operations of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), based in Tirana and focusing on reconciliation measures for youth, was announced. The 2018 London/Vienna and 2019 Poznań Leaders' Summits had youth updates on their agendas. In addition, EU–Western Balkans Youth Platform meetings took place in Trieste in 2017 and in Podgorica in 2018. Another player, the Balkan Regional Platform for Youth Participation and Dialogue, managed by the Association of Local Democracy (ALDA), has examined mobility and the future of work for young people. Since 2015, it has organised Balkan Youth Fora for Local Democracy in Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in 2018 in North Macedonia. Yet the voice of youth in the Western Balkans regional cooperation still needs further attention.

In Turkey, the EU has been a big supporter of youth policy over the years, aiming to increase its level of compliance with the EU *acquis* in the field of employment and social policy, to progress towards the European social model, and to develop its human resources further.

In 2018, the 'credible enlargement' perspective for the Western Balkans and enhanced EU engagement with the region moved education up in priority; accordingly, the Western Balkans are called upon to invest more in their younger generation of future EU citizens and give them a perspective for the future, not the past. The European Commission's Communication on this subject (2018) also requests further efforts to increase the competitiveness of the Western Balkan economies, in order to address high unemployment, especially among the young. Stronger skills-based economies will also help to attenuate the current brain drain, turning it into 'brain circulation'. The EU–Western Balkans Summit of 2018 decided to promote increased opportunity for youth, while ensuring that this contributes to socioeconomic growth. For Turkey, the dialogue with the EU continues with Turkey as a strategically important partner.

The European Parliament, in the recent draft report of its AFET Committee of 7 February 2020 in preparation of the EU-Western Balkans Summit of 6 May 2020, recommends tackling brain drain with concrete measures such as promoting good-quality, inclusive education reforms and the creation of job opportunities for young people.

4.2 Strategic and institutional setting in the Enlargement region: progress and challenges

Chapter 26 of the *acquis communautaire* covers the areas of education, training, youth and culture, which are primarily the competence of the countries. The cooperation framework on education and training policies and the open method of coordination guide cooperation. Countries need to have the legal and financial framework and implementing capacity to ensure sound management of education, training and youth community programmes. Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) is in the lead on youth support.

The European Parliament has youth policy high on its agenda and has regular meetings with youth from the Western Balkans and Turkey in close cooperation with the Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). The European Youth Parliament, of which Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey are members, organises biennial European Youth Events in Strasbourg where youth are invited to shape and share ideas on the future of Europe.

The EU Youth Strategy (2019–27)²⁸ is the key reference document for EU Member States and the Enlargement region. The EU Dashboard and expert group on indicators support the monitoring of progress in implementation and inform future policy making. In addition, through its Youth Partnership programme with the Council of Europe (Western Balkans-6 and Turkey included since 1998), the EU seeks complementarity of youth strategies. The Council of Europe has launched its Youth Sector Strategy 2030, oriented towards the SDGs 2030 and the Paris Declaration. The Central European Initiative, based in Trieste, also pursues a youth strategy for the Western Balkans.

In line with EU accession requirements, youth policies and action plans are being developed in all Western Balkan countries and Turkey. The main issues tackled are youth unemployment, poverty, job insecurity and, recently, emigration. Youth policies will help to equip young people with qualifications and competences in a global world. While there are different definitions of youth in the countries, a priority goal is to involve young people in youth policies. Different studies confirm that there are many commonalities, including the challenge of cross-sectoral policy making (interministerial as well as with other bodies) as well as the lack of capacity and the scarcity of finance (Petkovic, 2018). In addition, the lack of interest and trust in politics makes it difficult to harness the potential of young people's involvement in policy making (see RCC, 2015–19).

Policy areas in youth policies include education and linking non-formal to formal education, training and employment, health, values and religion, leisure and culture, military and alternative service, family policy and child welfare, housing, and youth justice. Implementation therefore requires cross-sectoral cooperation with ministries of education, labour and youth, social partners, chambers of commerce, civil society, and the private sector. Cross-cutting topics are youth participation and citizenship and/or social inclusion. Institutions such as SALTO-Youth (Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities for Youth) have a mandate to support the Western Balkans in their youth policy design and implementation. Youth@Work Strategic Partnership on Youth Employability and Entrepreneurship is a transnational institutional alliance – comprising 11 Erasmus+ national agencies, 4 SALTO-Youth resource centres, as well as the European Solidarity Corps Resource Centre – aiming

²⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/youth-strategy_en

to foster youth employability and entrepreneurship through the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps EU programmes. The Turkey National Agency has a leading role.

The countries have established the main institutions for cross-sectoral youth policy making (e.g. the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership)²⁹, and there is potential for more institutional links, in particular at local and municipal levels, as well as for links between research, policy and practice. The institutional settings in the countries include national youth councils and youth forums, youth centres, youth non-governmental organisation (NGOs), ministries and directorates within ministries. In most of the countries the youth councils have formed a national youth parliament to make the opinions of young people heard.

Further information on youth policies in the Western Balkans and Turkey can be found in the EU Youth Wiki for the Erasmus programme countries (Turkey, North Macedonia, Serbia), and for the Erasmus partner countries in the Youth Wiki of the European Commission-Council of Europe Youth Partnership initiative. The country reports of 2017 are the most recent ones. These reports have been drawn up by the contact persons who are part of the initiative (Western Balkans-6 and Turkey). The Youth Wiki covers education and training, employment and entrepreneurship, health and wellbeing; participation, voluntary work, social inclusion, creativity and culture. The Council of Europe has also established a Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR), which provides input.

The European Fund for the Balkans provides another mapping exercise, applying to Albania, Montenegro and Serbia (2016). There is also a briefing note by the Think Tank of the European Parliament entitled 'Youth challenges and options in the future' (2017). This is complemented by another review, jointly done by SALTO and PEYR (financed through the Erasmus+ Youth Programme), entitled *Recent achievements and current challenges in youth policies in the Western Balkans* (Petkovic, 2018).

4.3 EU, regional and global players: a common endeavour

Besides the ETF and its work in the Western Balkans and Turkey, there are many players supporting youth. Below is a list of examples of EU, regional and global players. The focus of their activities is on various aspects of youth policy, and their roles and responsibilities, offers and solutions are complementary. In response to COVID-19, all the institutions are examining current and future initiatives to respond to the needs of the countries, as demonstrated by their respective websites.

European Training Foundation

The ETF supports youth within its mandate and as part of its support to human capital development in the region through VET in a lifelong learning context. It contributes to youth policy development and implementation in the areas of education and training and employment for skills and competence for the labour market. Its interventions look into cross-cutting issues such as social inclusion and youth entrepreneurship, while encouraging participatory governance models.

European Commission and Council of Europe Youth Partnership programme

Established in 1998 (lead DG EAC). Its priorities include social inclusion, quality development of youth work and cooperation at regional level. The Western Balkans and Turkey are part of this partnership.

²⁹ EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership programme: 'Getting Across' – a peer-learning seminar on cross-sectoral youth policy in the Western Balkans, 25–27 October 2016, Budva, Montenegro.

The programme includes a network of expert youth researchers (PEYR) and has European youth centres in Strasbourg and Budapest. The main thrust of this long-standing partnership is to bring the youth policies of the European Commission and the Council of Europe closer together and seek complementarity. The European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy of the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership relies on a network of national correspondents who are youth policy specialists responsible for collecting national data.

European Youth Information and Counselling Agency (ERYICA)

Established in 1986. Cooperating members or affiliates are youth organisations from the EU, European Economic Area and Western Balkans, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia.

Eurodesk

Established in 1990 as an international NGO. It is a network for European and national information centres for young people and those involved with them. It offers youth information and international learning opportunities and is supported by the Erasmus programme. Eurodesk manages the European Youth Portal with institutions from North Macedonia and Turkey participating as Erasmus programme countries. It is for young people who live, work and learn in Europe, covers eight main themes and involves 35 countries. Information is available at European and country level. The European Youth Portal has a Western Balkans section for youth from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo.

SALTO-Youth South East Europe Resource Centre

Since 2003, SALTO has supported youth work in the Western Balkans, starting with work through the EU Youth Programme 2000–06, which was partially open to the Western Balkan countries. Since 2014, there have been contact points in the Western Balkans-6 that work together with SALTO to support young people's access to the Erasmus+ Youth Programme, including the Western Balkans Youth Window. SALTO is also working with Turkey in the framework of the Erasmus+ programme.

European Youth Forum

Includes international youth NGOs, national youth organisations, youth councils, and representatives from North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey. The Strategic Plan 2020–2023 defines the areas and activities for the upcoming period. There is also a policy paper on the future of work that informs youth initiatives.

EU Western Balkans Youth Forum

Launched in the framework of the Berlin Process and the Positive Agenda for Youth in the Western Balkans. There is regular dialogue and exchange; however, the Forum will need support to become an influencer and a well-recognised body for policy making. The ETF has attended and contributed to the work of the Forum, for instance at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Trieste in 2017.

Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)

Based in Tirana. It follows the model of the Franco-German Youth Office cooperation. RYCO fosters reconciliation among youth in the region through education and training, including mobility initiatives and joint projects. From the start, RYCO has had to face the challenge of becoming operational, in particular because of the complex and sensitive political environment, but also because of a lack of institutional human capacities for implementation. The ETF has had some mutual exchange with RYCO since its establishment in 2017.

Regional Cooperation Council

Has a section on support to youth in its work programme 2020–22. This includes the Youth Lab initiative, whose objective is to involve youth in policy making, building on some pilot initiatives including one in 2018 in the North Macedonian parliament. The ETF has contributed expertise in the framework of its cooperation agreement with the Regional Cooperation Council.

Many youth initiatives are being implemented also through UN agencies, for instance the Joint Programme on Youth Empowerment, the UN Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth (including the Joint Knowledge Facility on youth employment prospects), and others. The European Commission is in regular exchange and cooperation with UN agencies in relation to various topics concerning youth policy. The ETF contributes expertise to UNICEF as part of the cooperation agreement and cooperates with UNESCO and the ILO in particular through the Inter-Agency Working Group.

In 2020, KfW and the Western Balkans-6 Chamber Investment Forum have started an initiative called Challenge Funds for VET, which includes youth in the Western Balkans as direct and indirect beneficiaries. Bilateral donors such as the British Council, Swisscontact, KulturKontakt and GIZ are also relevant players in the area. The ETF is in dialogue and exchange with its partners to maximise input into human capital development with a focus on youth.

4.4 EU funding support for youth: a flavour and some proposals for the future

The main EU funding mechanism to support youth in the Western Balkans is the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) programme at country and regional levels and in all areas covered under youth policy (education and training, employment, health, culture, etc.). This has included IPA I (2007–13) and IPA II (2014–20), covering financial allocations for reforms in education and training, employment, social inclusion and entrepreneurship development. In many of these initiatives youth are indirect or direct target groups: Examples of indirect support are education sector reviews, qualifications development, quality assurance instruments, and key competences; as regards direct support there are active labour market measures for youth and entrepreneurship programmes. IPA III (2021–27) is under way, and allocations for youth are planned to be increased by 13% compared to those in IPA II. In response to the COVID-19 crisis, IPA II at country and regional levels is currently reprogrammed accordingly. The priorities are health and the SME sector, followed by education, but a ‘green deal’ and digital transformation will remain high on the agenda. The ETF provides input in the sphere of human capital development.

The VET Pilot Mobility Scheme for the Western Balkans, a EUR 2 million initiative funded through IPA II, has just started and includes intraregional mobility of learners and teachers between EU Member States and the Western Balkans. Here also, mobility activities have been postponed due to COVID-19. The scheme will prepare all Western Balkan-6 countries for full participation in Erasmus+ (Serbia, Turkey and North Macedonia are already programme countries). A further EUR 4 million will be made available for wider outreach and the tender has been launched beginning of April. The initiative is managed by DG EAC and the ETF is a partner in support of design and implementation and with reference to making results available for mainstream reforms.

Erasmus+ and in particular Youth in Action targets youth as a social category and seeks the involvement of young people as a stakeholder group for youth policies and implementation. The budget for the period 2021–27 is planned to be doubled. The European Youth Portal and the Erasmus+ Window for Western Balkans are examples of fostering involvement of youth from the

region in mobility initiatives and education and training programmes. Another example is a recently launched regional IPA Multi-Beneficiary programme, the Youth Lab, implemented by the Regional Cooperation Council to make young people of the Western Balkans part of the policy dialogue.

The European Commission's Communication of February 2018 on the Western Balkans calls for greater investment in the young generation in the light of socioeconomic development (European Commission, 2018). The ETF's experience in the field, discussions with partners in the region and internationally, and various studies say that support needs to continue and to be extended with well-targeted measures. The COVID-19 crisis, on the other hand, calls for short-, medium- and long-term planning and responses to the needs of the countries. It goes without saying that emphasis needs to be put on ensuring a high-quality digital learning environment. This will include access to infrastructure for inclusive education, training and support for teachers, trainers and mentors, agile delivery modes of education programmes and reliable assessment tools. It will also merit a look into new governance models, including education, the world of work, parents and young people. This is also the moment where post-2020 planning is under way in the countries and where detailed needs and ways forward can therefore be discussed.

5. THE WAY FORWARD

Overall, the youth employment and skills development agenda in the SEET region has significantly evolved since 2010. Policy measures are now more integrated and are slowly moving towards a more comprehensive, active social inclusion approach covering a wide range of policy strands, aiming to reduce the risks of joblessness, poverty and social exclusion.

Challenges remain, however, in the coverage, relevance and evidence-based implementation of these support measures in an ever-changing economic and labour market context; such challenges include changing the expectations of young people.

The COVID-19 crisis that began in early 2020 has accelerated transformations in the labour market and education towards digitalisation and online solutions. This may deepen social inequalities, given the existing digital divide in education, and may affect the potential of those in more precarious employment, making them even more prone to economic and social exclusion. The available information shows already that students from socially vulnerable backgrounds are accumulating learning gaps; for example, the impossibility of organising practical learning and on-the-job training sessions in VET will impact on future graduates' potential on the labour market. Policy makers in education, employment and social inclusion need to address such growing risks for both students and young graduates, workers or jobseekers, in a timely and consistent manner.

Against this backdrop, we put forward here a number of key messages for the policy makers and stakeholders of the SEET countries, the EU, and the donor community in the region.

5.1 Dealing with uncertainty

Policy responses

The experiences of the last decade in the region and globally call for actions aimed at building the resilience of individuals and companies, and agile public policies. Just as the 2008 crisis impacted deeply on the SEET region and recovery took several years, the COVID-19 pandemic also tests the countries' readiness to deal with sudden changes in socioeconomic conditions and to devise social policy responses fit to cater for all. Swift and coordinated policy responses are needed at both national and global levels to limit the direct effects of the COVID-19 health crisis on youth and their families, while mitigating the indirect economic fallout. Demand-side measures to protect those facing income losses because of reduced economic activity are critical to stimulating the economy. Income protection also mitigates the impact, especially amongst low-income and already disadvantaged groups of working youth. Besides the measures that governments have taken to support SMEs with their liquidity problems (e.g. loan guarantees, direct loans, grants), financial support should be considered for those young entrepreneurs who want to experiment with creating new products or services that are helping to fight the current health crisis.

Focus on youth

The impact on youth employment is likely to be severe, given that those aged 15–24 are already more likely to be unemployed than adults. Furthermore, COVID-19-related shocks to the labour market are likely to affect the quality of jobs for young people, in particular zero-hour contracts, informal employment, and the like. Such forms of employment are markedly more common among youth: a

high percentage of employed young people hold informal jobs, while many are among the extreme and moderate working poor in all the SEET countries.

Although short-term financial support is needed, the differing levels of impact and a long-term strategy should also be considered. For example, promoting a narrative of opportunity may ease the transition into a post-pandemic economy; learning how to engage young people in a work culture in flux is just one way to work toward increasing the resilience of economies.

Another area of impact is that of young migrants and refugees. This group tends to be left behind in the provision of healthcare when national systems' capacities are overstretched due to COVID-19. There is also a risk COVID-19 may further stigmatise migrants and refugees or increase xenophobia and racism, which in turn may further affect the ability of young migrants and refugees to receive healthcare and maintain their livelihoods.

Consolidation of the education sector

The global COVID-19 pandemic is having an unprecedented impact on education systems all over the world, with far-reaching social consequences. The situation can be expected to have severe consequences in terms of interrupting learning, compromising nutrition, and elevating dropout rates. In particular, the closures of educational premises disproportionately affect disadvantaged and underprivileged youth, who have fewer educational opportunities outside of school, lack access to remote learning tools and the internet, and rely on free or discounted school meals for healthy nutrition. With protracted closures, ensuring that students return to schools, once reopened, will become a challenge. To alleviate the situation, governments should ensure there is continuity in learning by promoting high-tech, low-tech and no-tech solutions, focusing in particular on reaching vulnerable groups of young people.

The COVID-19 crisis is also an opportunity to accelerate the transformation of education systems, ways of working or doing business, and social interaction. Education and training are at the core of policy responses aimed at counteracting the effects of the crisis, as upskilling and reskilling can boost resilience. At the same time, the countries need to address the growing inequalities in access to education due to, among other things, the digital divide that impedes children and students from attending classes, or insufficient readiness of teachers and schools to deliver education digitally. Learning losses accumulate in the area of VET as well, since practice in schools and companies came to a standstill with the lockdown restrictions. In the short to medium term, learning gaps of this kind require careful reflection and remedial measures.

The European Commission, through its dialogue with the Member States and Enlargement countries, is sharing countries' experiences and practices related to the implications of the coronavirus crisis for education and training. VET policy makers and VET providers are sharing information on how VET provision is being adapted in the current circumstances through teaching and learning in the digital environment. Examples of good support solutions for teachers, trainers and learners can at this point be a valuable resource pool of ideas in an entirely new situation for education systems.

Countries are racing to fill the void with distance-learning solutions, but the uncertain duration of the closures further complicates their efforts. These range from hi-tech alternatives such as real-time video classes conducted remotely to lower-tech options such as educational programming on radio and television.

Many lessons emerge from all these efforts and initiatives, but one signal is clear – the digital transformation in education is crucial. This calls for wide-ranging changes, from curricula and teaching methods to means of assessing learning outcomes and support to individual learners, particularly involving equipment and internet access. The risk of leaving behind certain groups, such as learners from rural areas or socially deprived households, is higher than ever.

The transition from school to work is a similar case. Support packages are needed for young people with limited or no work experience or social protection coverage. Given the foreseeable job scarcity or sudden shifts in demand, there is a tendency for young people – and not only young people – to accept low-skilled or low-quality jobs, including informal employment, in order to escape from unemployment. Although such phenomena are inherent in crisis situations, this may have a long-lasting impact on human capital potential. Current and future labour markets, already in transformation because of digitalisation and the impact of climate and demographic change, call for a shift from the traditional design of unemployment insurance and rules for accessing active labour market programmes, towards more permeable and flexible eligibility criteria to access activation and protection measures.

While the crisis strains national budgets, a reorientation of EU and donor support in general is expected in the region. Beyond the sorely needed short-term income replacement and liquidity for financial markets, countries need to foster measures to build up new sets of skills and resilience among both individuals and companies. This was a major lesson of the 2008 crisis.

5.2 Socioeconomic transformations and a renewed policy paradigm

Green, digital and entrepreneurship skills

Green transformations of economies pose both challenges and opportunities for workforce adaptation. Young people are the most exposed, and often they lead the change, as has happened with the promotion of the green and climate action agenda. The SEET economies are still far from the desired circular economy and must still undergo major reforms towards more sustainable and environment-friendly industries, services and agricultural activities.

The digital divide is a major threat for the SEET countries, and a regional digital connectivity agenda may help close the gaps between them and advanced economies. As digitalisation impacts on both economies and societies, digital skills should be mainstreamed in education and training programmes, both as a transversal competence and as occupation-specific skills, as information technology drives transformations across all economic sectors.

Economic cooperation within the region and with the EU single market call for increased competitiveness and readiness to cope with market pressures and comply with European standards for production, trade, and other areas. SMEs and particularly domestic enterprises and investors, including younger entrepreneurs, are at high risk of losing position in a highly competitive, technology-driven market. In this respect, entrepreneurship as a key competence should be embedded in national curricula so as to equip young people with the necessary entrepreneurship skills and mindset to drive innovation. Innovation and technology create opportunities in the region and mitigate the tendency toward migration among younger and skilled groups.

The skills gap

In these transformative contexts, augmented by the volatility caused by the impact of the health crisis, the gap between the skills learned and the skills needed is becoming increasingly obvious, as traditional learning falls short of equipping students with the knowledge and skills they need to thrive. The widening gap is driven by a range of structural problems, including a breakdown in the diffusion of innovation from leading firms and regions towards those lagging behind, barriers to entrepreneurship and business dynamics, skills mismatches, and limited and/or obsolete skills formation resulting in poor wage and employment outcomes for low-skilled workers. The persistence or rise in the number of young people without jobs or trapped in low-quality jobs, including informal work, also presents a major challenge to social cohesion, since young people who do not find employment and feel excluded from all walks of life are more likely to drift into the informal sector or into crime, and may be susceptible to the influence of political forces that seek solutions to economic distress through exclusionary policies.

Policy responses

So far, the last decades of reform in the SEET countries have concentrated on mitigating the problems arising from the negative effects of economic restructuring, with a focus on employability. Developments in education and training systems (mostly supported by EU and international partners) have concentrated on system reform models. There is an urgent need to bolster skills policies and to implement them in support of economic reform and productivity, and those processes have implications for secondary, post-secondary, tertiary VET and on-the-job training. An innovation reform model for VET for inclusive growth with social inclusion and cohesion should include a focus on technology adoption and innovation, with linkages between all levels of VET provision, sectoral and cross-sectoral skills development programmes, development of management skills, and competences for a sustainable and entrepreneurial economy.

Beyond improving the relevance of skills generated through initial education and training systems, interventions similar to youth guarantees seem to work in shortening transitions from school to work. This kind of intervention calls for new roles and modes of cooperation among schools, labour market intermediaries, social assistance centres, youth organisations, social partners and local public administrations. Overall, it calls for a renewed paradigm of education, training, employment and social policies that will fit a very fluid labour market and rapidly changing social and economic needs.

Tackling the social risks of poverty and exclusion requires specific governance arrangements in education, employment, social and local economic development, including changes in roles and responsibilities at municipal levels and changes in the ways public sector actors interact with non-public ones, such as companies, NGOs and youth organisations. In addition, data and information used for planning, delivery and monitoring of policies have to encompass the wide variety of exclusion 'profiles' reflecting multiple social disadvantages. Skills development is a key ingredient of policy action that aims to tackle the risks of unemployment or inactivity and social exclusion. The level and relevance of a person's education predict the probability of their employment and wellbeing.

The EU's strategic frameworks in the area of skills and employment reconfirm the need for a well-skilled workforce that can compete in terms of productivity, quality and innovation³⁰. Education and

³⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/eu-policy-in-the-field-of-adult-learning_en

training bolster personal development and active citizenship and promote equity, social inclusion and cohesion. A renewed skills agenda for Europe and enhanced cooperation on VET policies are in the making and will be adopted in 2020. This may further guide the Enlargement countries in the design of future actions to boost youth's skills, employment and social integration.

5.3 Ensuring the sustainability of regular data collection tools

All the SEET countries have devoted efforts to designing and implementing measures and tools for regular data collection and youth statistics. This activity has mainly been driven by national demands to address issues related to the employability of young people, skills mismatches and labour market needs, and by the commitments the countries have made to ensuring continuous information and feedback loops.

The countries will need to secure the resources and conditions that will allow for systematic use of the newly established tools (e.g. surveys and tracer systems), and to conduct regular vocational graduate tracking. Regular tracking, on the other hand, will be more beneficial if it is more comprehensive, covering not only initial training but also continuing training of graduates.

Other issues for consideration concern the quality assurance of the methodological arrangements and their improvement and diversification over time. These issues include ensuring representative samples, making more extensive use of combined administrative and survey data, and linking various databases (e.g. education and employment information systems, social security systems) so as to exploit the wealth of information, as well as introducing longitudinal surveys.

Underpinning the methodological aspects, the SEET countries will need to ensure proper resources (expertise, financial), as well as securing real ownership over the data collection tools by integrating them into their national statistical systems. It will also be of crucial importance to build up institutional partnerships for tracking data collection, interpretation, analysis and dissemination; this would entail, for instance, wider cooperation of ministries and agencies with statistical offices, other relevant public authorities, the research community, academia, training providers, and others.

Once the comprehensiveness and quality of data received through the various surveys and tools are guaranteed, the SEET countries will need to ensure that the results will feed regularly back into their policy-making cycles. This should help to ensure that their education, training and labour market systems will be meeting the goals of contributing to employability and economic growth and responding to the needs and aspirations of individual learners.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BAM	Bosnia and Herzegovina convertible mark (currency)
DG EAC	Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
EUR	Euro (currency)
GDP	Gross domestic product
IEA-TIMSS	International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement-Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
MSMEs	Micro, small and medium-sized enterprises
NEET(s)	(Young people) not in employment, education or training
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PEYR	Pool of European Youth Researchers
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SALTO-Youth	Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities for Youth
SBA	Small Business Act
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEET	South Eastern Europe and Turkey
SMEs	Small and medium-sized enterprises
UN-DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VET	Vocational education and training

Country codes

AL	Albania
BA	Bosnia and Herzegovina
ME	Montenegro
MK	North Macedonia
RS	Serbia
TR	Turkey
XK	Kosovo

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