

COUNTRY BRIEF – SERBIA

Integrated monitoring process of the
EU Council Recommendation on VET
and the Osnabrück Declaration

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CONTENTS

CONTENTS	3
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INTRODUCTION	4
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NATIONAL VET CONTEXT	5
Structure of the education system	5
Institutional background	5
Legal and strategic framework	6
Implementation facts and figures	6
Main bottlenecks	7

NATIONAL VET PRIORITIES	8
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MAIN POLICY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE LAST YEAR	9
Strategic developments	9
Legislation developments	9

KEY STATISTICS	10
Education	10
Employment	10

CONCLUSIONS	11
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ACRONYMS	12
----------	----

REFERENCES	14
------------	----

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on all aspects of the Serbian economy and employment-related trends, and caused an increase in the annual inflation rate¹. It also affected the education system since all the educational institutions were prompted to maintain the learning process during this difficult period, primarily through digital tools.

Nevertheless, the overall political situation did not change significantly during 2021. However, the elections at all governance levels took place in April 2022, and the elections' results might influence attitudes and (re)actions towards the various social issues, including education. This also means that the government was operating on a 'technical' basis for the last 2 months, and the formation of a new one may take 3 months, which may slow down the implementation of the various strategic activities.

In 2021 Serbia adopted the new Strategy for Education Development by 2030 (SED 2030) and, at the beginning of 2022, decided to take part in the integrated process of implementing and monitoring the Osnabrück Declaration and the EU Council Recommendation on Vocational Education and Training (VET) to avoid parallel reporting and monitoring processes by EU and non-EU countries.

Bearing this in mind, this report provides a brief overview of the current VET context and national VET priorities; it describes policy developments in 2021 and presents the key available data relating to education and employment. The final section contains a summary of key findings and recommendations in the form of conclusions that will support the development of National Implementation Plans for an integrated monitoring approach.

¹ SORS: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-US/vesti/statisticalrelease/?p=8542&a=03&s=0301?s=0301>

NATIONAL VET CONTEXT

Structure of the education system

The formal education system of Serbia consists of preschool, primary, secondary (general, art and VET), higher education and adult education. Dual education in the Serbian system presents a model of VET implementation of VET. The total duration of compulsory education is 9 years, covering the preparatory year-long preschool programme and primary education (8 years), leaving secondary education out of mandatory education.

Secondary VET entails 3 and 4-year programmes (around 250 in total) in 15 fields of the economy.

Adult education, including Continuing VET (CVET), is implemented as formal primary and secondary education and as non-formal education.

Formal CVET programmes last from 1 to 4 years (regular vocational education, requalification, programmes for obtaining additional qualifications, specialised programmes and apprenticeship), and are based on the secondary VET curricula. Primary and secondary schools may implement adult education if accredited as publicly recognised organisers of adult education activities (PROAEA) by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (MoESTD). If the organisers of non-formal adult education activities are public or private organisations or companies, they need to be accredited by the Qualifications Agency (QA).

Institutional background

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development is the key line ministry, while the National Education Council (NEC) and Council for Vocational Education and Adult Education (CVEAE) are advisory bodies, as well as the Council for National Qualifications Framework (CNQF), which gives recommendations on the process of planning and development of human potential under public policies in the field of lifelong learning, employment, career guidance and counselling. The Institute for the Improvement of Education, in particular the VET and Adult Education Centre, plays a key role in drafting VET curricula and technical documents for VET implementation. The Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation is responsible for defining educational standards for general subjects, evaluation, formal education quality assurance and research-related activities. The Regional School Administrations, which are regional units of the MoESTD, monitor and evaluate the quality of work of all schools, and are involved in managing public-private partnerships for VET. The Commission for the development and implementation of dual education oversees the implementation of dual education and evaluates the results achieved.

The Qualifications Agency deals with the quality assurance of development and implementation of the National Qualifications Framework of Serbia (NQFS), non-formal education and any other adult education issues, such as recognition of prior learning (RPL) and career guidance and counselling (CGC), etc.

The Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) are expert and advisory bodies with the main function of determining the demand for qualifications in the labour market through dialogue and cooperation of representatives of labour and education sectors. SSCs are responsible for qualifications acquired through VET and CVET and propose lists of qualifications by levels and types that can be acquired through RPL.

The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia has important roles in dual education, in particular in companies' accreditation for work-based learning (WBL), instructors' training and licensing, managing registries of employers and dual education contracts (contracts signed between schools and companies).

The social partners and their organisations are represented in bodies such as the NEC, CVEAE, CNQF and SSCs.

Legal and strategic framework

In Serbia, VET is regulated by the Law on Fundamentals of Education System, the Law on Secondary Education (LSE), the Law on Dual Education (LDE) and the Law on NQFS.

The new Strategy for Education Development 2030 and the accompanying Action Plan 2021-2023 were adopted in June 2021 with two general objectives: the first relating to increasing the quality of teaching and learning, equality and accessibility of pre-university education, including VET, and strengthening the educational role of all educational institutions, and the second focusing on improving accessibility, quality, relevance and equity of higher education.

In the strategic framework, adult education (including CVET) is perceived as an integral part of the education system and, in general, all the strategic objectives in this area are the same and/or correlate with the priorities relating to the rest of the education system and are defined by the SED 2030.

Implementation facts and figures

VET schools are attended by 72.9% of the secondary students' population. In the 2021/2022 school year, around 4.5% of the total number of students attending VET schools were enrolled in dual education².

Since 2010, curricula in vocational education have been developed based on the qualification standards. Currently, the curricula of 120 educational profiles are based on the qualification standard, of which 34 are further innovated after adoption. Furthermore, the enrolment of students in educational profiles based on the qualification standard is constantly growing – in the 2021/22 school year, around 87% of students are enrolled in educational profiles that are based on qualification standards³.

As in the last decade, the 4-year programmes are more attractive than those lasting 3 years. Also, the dual education offer is increasing – in the school year 2020/21, 48 dual profiles were available to first-grade students in 120 schools collaborating with 295 accredited training companies, while in the school year 2021/22, 54 dual profiles were available to first-grade students in 150 schools collaborating with 357 accredited training companies. There is no significant gap between girls and boys in VET education in total; however, if data are observed only for dual vocational education, the gender gap is significant, and mostly male students opt for this model⁴.

At the end of 2021, 94 institutions had PROAEA status for 352 accredited programmes.

The MoESTD and QA compiled a unique List of Qualifications of RS in order to obtain a precise recording of employed and unemployed persons' qualification structure and support overcoming potential gaps between supply and demand for knowledge and skills in the labour market. The List of Qualifications of RS currently includes more than 4 600 qualifications for all levels of education.

² MoESTD data.

³ MoESTD data.

⁴ MoESTD data.

Main bottlenecks

The national investment in education in Serbia is low – 4% of the gross domestic product⁵. This is below average for the group of countries with the same income (4.7%), but also concerning the average investments in the countries of the region (4.6%)⁶.

Relevant data, especially regarding the quantitative objectives and forecasting capabilities are still insufficient, and the establishment of the education management information system (EMIS) is ongoing.

Participation in adult education in Serbia is low due to several reasons – the inadequate offer of training programmes/courses in terms of the qualifications needed by companies, the inadequate format in which training courses are provided (not enough online courses, flexible timelines, shorter courses, etc.) and high training costs⁷. The dropout rate in the functional elementary education of adults, which includes VET training in the last year of schooling, is extremely high – 49% of enrolled participants do not complete their schooling⁸.

Recent legislation changes limited students' practical training / professional practice with companies to 25% if implemented outside dual education. These changes led to a reduction of the possibility for the majority of VET students to learn in a real working environment since many employers cannot fulfil preconditions for entering dual education.

According to the latest available results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018, low socioeconomic status (SES) students more often attend VET schools, and more than 80% of students from 3-year VET profiles do not reach the basic level of literacy⁹.

Serbia does not participate in the International Adult Competence Assessment Programme (PIAAC), implemented by the OECD, even though it may improve adult education policy.

The importance of career guidance and counselling (CGC) is recognised in legislation and strategies relating to both IVET and CVET, and especially in dual education where the formation of teams for CGC is foreseen by the LDE. However, in practice, it is still mostly based on the provision of information about occupations and is not promoted as an opportunity for the development of career management skills. The number of students using CGC at school is rather low.

⁵ VET is mostly publicly funded; the allocation formula is input-based and does not allow funding of developmental activities and the real needs of schools and students. Running costs, teachers' professional development, transport costs for the secondary school students and uniforms or health exams for VET students might be covered by local self-governments but since secondary education is not mandatory, it usually depends on the willingness or ability of local authorities to provide for such costs.

⁶ Serbia: Human Capital and Jobs, World bank – <https://www.worldbank.org/humancapital>

⁷ Ex-post analysis of the implementation of the Strategy of Education Development in Serbia 2020 – https://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/3-Ex-post-analiza_0202.pdf

⁸ MoESTD data.

⁹ Videnović, M. Čaprić, G. (2020). PISA 2018, Report for the Republic of Serbia: <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/PISA-2018-IZVE%C5%A0TAJ.pdf>

NATIONAL VET PRIORITIES

VET, and especially dual education, remained high on the agenda of the Serbian authorities. A clear strategy for the roll-out of dual education profiles is yet to be developed, and the capacities of schools and companies to fulfil all the provisions of LDE requirements are to be assessed in the following months.

The general goals for VET focus on the increasing relevance of curricula and closer cooperation between the world of labour and education, which require more efficient work of the SSCs in developing proposals for qualification standards and the revision of profiles based on them. Intense activities relating to the improvement of the quality of work-based learning and students' practice in schools are also prioritised.

By adopting the Economic Reform Program (ERP) 2021/23¹⁰, the Serbian authorities committed to implementing activities relating to the development of digital skills and support of lifelong learning; improving school-to-work transition through WBL; piloting the Youth Guarantee and improving skills information. In the chapter relating to Education and Skills, qualifications oriented to the needs of the labour market, and the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for Dual Education are explicitly mentioned among the reform priorities.

The Smart Specialisation Strategy (2020/27) anticipated activities and measures dedicated to the establishment of cooperation between faculties, science and technology parks and VET schools.

The SED 2030, among other priorities, underlined that the education system should be concentrated on the development of new curricula and the improvement of existing curricula, especially in VET, the development of students' key competencies, the further development of formal and non-formal adult education, including CVET, and the establishment of 12 regional training centres for training, reskilling and upskilling in line with labour market needs to support the development of dual education and lifelong learning.

Since the implementation of the previous strategy mostly failed in the area of adult education, goals that refer to RPL and increasing coverage, accessibility and quality of adult education and training programmes are again among the priorities.

Recognising the need for evidence-based decision-making and quality assurance of education, the SED 2030 also highlights as an important priority the improvement of monitoring and evaluation of VET and dual education. The goal is to have a Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) system that would not only follow students during education, but also after they enter the labour market, and to provide a feedback loop for further improvements. The monitoring system should also help dropout prevention since this is a common issue, especially in VET.

Also, one of the priorities is the development of short-cycle study programmes at the NQFS level 5 as a way of supporting further harmonisation of the NQFS with European policies and facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications. Following the SED 2030, such programmes are to be built upon secondary education, be practice-based and prepare students to enter the labour market or be one of the ways for entering higher education.

The creation of new databases and registers or the integration of existing ones within EMIS (such as the NQFS Register (containing three sub-registers: Sub-register of national qualifications; the Sub-register of qualification standards and the Sub-register of PROAEA), the Register of institutions, the Register of study programmes and the Register of curricula) are also prioritised.

¹⁰ Economic Reform Programme 2021-2023, Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Serbia: https://www.mfin.gov.rs/upload/media/ID63iX_60f11fc3470a8.pdf

MAIN POLICY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE PAST YEAR

Strategic developments

In order to enhance skills, the Strategy on Scientific and Technological Development 2021-2030, the Employment Strategy 2021-2026 and the SED 2030 have been adopted.

The specific strategic objectives at all levels of the education system (including VET) pursuant to the SED 2030 are as follows: upgrading of the digital infrastructure in education and training and improvements in schools' connectivity, the further development of EMIS and the establishment of an analytical unit within MoESTD to be in charge of continuous analyses of the situation in education. Therefore, the activities in the aforementioned areas have been intensified.

Piloting of the dual education M&E framework was finalised at the end of 2021, and the framework is ready to be integrated into the system as well as the RPL system for which implementation has just begun.

The MoESTD remains committed to introducing the State Matura in the education system as a means of secondary education certification and qualification for enrolment in higher education. Students in 3-year secondary VET will take their final exam in 2022/2023, and those in programmes lasting 4 years (vocational schools, gymnasiums and art schools) will take General, Vocational or Artistic Matura exams in the 2023/2024 school year. The same rules and procedures are to be applied for students enrolled in dual education profiles as for the other VET students.

Legislation developments

Recent policy directions refer to the adoption of the bylaw on the implementation of practical teaching and professional practice in secondary VET. By this bylaw, the implementation and organisation of practical teaching and professional practice are more closely defined, especially where students' professional practice is implemented in both the VET school and in-company by defining the structure of the agreement between the school and company, the role of the company, the adaptation of practical teaching and professional practice for students with disabilities, and the characteristics of the workplace. This policy change is followed by the change in the LSE.

Furthermore, legislation relating to the standards for accreditation of non-formal adult education programmes, and legislation setting standards for self-evaluation and external evaluation of the quality of work of PROAEA have been adopted.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Serbia implemented a hybrid education model, thus additional legislation on distance learning was adopted to facilitate instruction and assessment while different projects¹¹ were implemented in order to support students that were at risk of the digital divide.

¹¹ e.g. the EU-funded project 'Bridging the digital divide in Serbia for the most vulnerable children' implemented by UNICEF Serbia with the support of the MoESTD, the project Development of ICT infrastructure in educational, scientific and cultural institutions – Connected schools, implemented by the Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications of the Republic of Serbia, etc.

KEY STATISTICS

Education

According to the last available data provided by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (SORS), 248 605 students participated in secondary education in the school year 2020/2021, of which 49.6% are female and 50.4% male students. Of the total number of schools, 518 312 are VET, 52 are mixed VET and general, and 4 are mixed art and VET schools¹².

According to the SED 2030¹³, the coverage rate in secondary education is 87.4%, the secondary school completion rate is 87%, and the rate of dropout from secondary education is 1.1%. The data from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS 2019)¹⁴ on students from Roma settlements are discouraging: the transition rate to secondary school is 55%, while the secondary school completion rate is 61%. There are no data on students with developmental impairments and disabilities – the MoESTD plans to collect the baseline data during 2022 through the EMIS.

According to EUROSTAT data, 6.6% of young people aged 18-24 left education and training early.

The most popular educational profiles in VET were from the following fields of education: economics, law and administration (12.6%), electrical engineering (10.8%), health and social welfare (9.3%), mechanical engineering and metal processing (9.1%) and trade, catering and tourism (8.6%)¹⁵.

The participation rate of young people and adults (15-24 age group) in formal and non-formal education and training in 2020 was 66.9% while for the 25-64 age group it was just 3.7%¹⁶.

The NEET rate in the fourth quarter of 2021 was 15.6%¹⁷, while with 3.3% of adults involved in lifelong learning education in 2020¹⁸, Serbia is far below all EU education and training, as well as national benchmarks.

Employment

Labour Force Survey data showed that, in the fourth quarter of 2021, the employment rate of people aged 15 and over was 50.0% (58.0% for men and 42.5% for women), while unemployment amounted to 9.8% (9.0% for men and 10.8% for women). The activity rate of people aged 15 and over in the fourth quarter of 2021 amounted to 55.4%, the activity rates among men and women being 63.7% and 47.7%, respectively. During the same period, the out of labour force rate was 44.6%. The informal employment rate in this quarter in all activities amounted to 13.7%. Young people remain a vulnerable group in the labour market – the youth employment rate (15-24 years) in the fourth quarter of 2021 was 23.3%, and the youth unemployment rate amounted to 28.7%¹⁹.

¹² SORS: <https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/11030104?languageCode=en-US>

¹³ SED 2030: <https://mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/SROVRS-2030-1.pdf>

¹⁴ Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey – UNICEF & Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia – 2019:

<https://www.unicef.org/serbia/media/16056/file/MICS%206%20Istra%C5%BEivanje%20vi%C5%A1estrukih%20pokazatelja%20za%202019.%20godinu.pdf>

¹⁵ SORS: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2021/HtmIE/G20211175.html>

¹⁶ SORS: <https://sdg.indikatori.rs/en-us/area/quality-education/?subarea=SDGUN040301&indicator=240002090105IND01>

¹⁷ SORS: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-US/oblasti/trziste-rada/anketa-o-radnoj-snazi>

¹⁸ EUROSTAT database: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/bookmark/2561320b-f909-4370-b0a2-e88a59845f0c?lang=en>

¹⁹ Labour Force Survey, IV quarter, SORS – February 2022: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2021/PdfE/G20211329.pdf>

CONCLUSIONS

The main policy initiatives and reforms that were initiated are the result of the multisector approach and are supported by international funding aside from the national budget. With SED 2030, the institutional landscape has not changed, and the increases in coverage, quality, relevance and efficiency of education remain important.

The digital transformation of education is progressing, and advancing digital learning and the development of digital competencies remains one of the government's key education priorities. Investments are being made in improving the information and communication technologies infrastructure and school connectivity, but the EMIS is still not fully operational. The EMIS should be designed to be interoperable with other national databases to maximise monitoring potentials and to enable the monitoring of different aspects of the student population, including underprivileged students. The EMIS is also expected to enable better coordination of stakeholders by new methodologies for data collection, as well as ensuring validity and reliability of data and their regular updating.

Dual education remained at the top of the VET reform agenda. Currently, improvements are being made in the process to ensure sufficient participation of employers, better conditions and quality of WBL for students in dual profiles, as well as to integrate the developed M&E into the existing quality assurance system.

However, despite the progress achieved over the past few years, the system still suffers from significant shortcomings: the skills mismatches are still high; exposure to in-company training of VET students is insufficient; there are no sufficient investments in education; the mechanisms for supporting the low SES students' transition from primary to secondary school are not being fully employed; the CGC is not being implemented in an adequate manner; and the RPL system is still not fully established.

Furthermore, a comprehensive approach to lifelong learning is yet to be achieved, especially at the outcome level (such as interinstitutional cooperation, encouraging employers to continue to invest in the development of skills of their labour force, or increasing the coverage of vulnerable groups).

The European frameworks should further inspire Serbia's monitoring and reporting framework by aligning with EU targets and policy exchange processes for 2030.

Therefore, it should be noted that Serbia follows the same direction as identified in the Osnabrück Declaration and the EU Council Recommendation on Vocational Education and Training, and that identified general national priorities such as the further development of VET and dual education, the further development of NQFS and the approach to lifelong learning are going to inform development and become part of the NIPs.

ACRONYMS

CGC	Career Guidance and Counselling
CNQF	Council for National Qualifications Framework
CVEA	Council for Vocational Education and Adult Education
CVET	Continuing VET
EMIS	Education Management Information System
ERP	Economic Reform Program
EU	European Union
LDE	Law on Dual Education
LNQFS	Law on National Qualifications Framework of Serbia
LSE	Law on Secondary Education
M&E	Monitoring & Evaluation
MoESTD	Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development
NEC	National Education Council
NEET	Not in education, employment, or training
NIPs	National Implementation Plans
NQFS	National Qualifications Framework of Serbia
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PIIAC	International Adult Competence Assessment Programme
PISA	Program for International Student Assessment
PROAEA	Publicly Recognised Organisers of Adult Education Activities
QA	Qualifications Agency

RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SED 2030	Strategy for Education Development 2030
SES	Socioeconomic status
SORS	Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia
SSCs	Sector Skills Councils
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WBL	Work-based learning

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