

# KEY POLICY DEVELOPMENTS IN EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

## 2025

# SERBIA

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# ABOUT THIS PAPER

Each year, the ETF monitors developments in education, skills, and employment in its partner countries to support informed decision-making by identifying trends, opportunities and challenges. The results are reported by country, across countries and by selected theme.

The present document is the country-level report (country fiche) for 2025 for Serbia. Like all ETF monitoring, it draws on multiple sources of evidence and is the culmination of a year-long process of data collection, analysis and consultations. One key source of evidence is the ETF KIESE database, which provides internationally comparable indicators on areas such as country demography, economy, education and employment. The indicators are sourced mainly from international repositories, including UNESCO, the World Bank, the OECD, Eurostat, and the ILO, while some come directly from partner countries, for instance, from their labour force surveys<sup>1</sup>.

Another source of evidence is the Torino Process, a flagship monitoring initiative of the ETF which compiles system performance indices (SPIs) on the basis of KIESE data and expert surveys. The SPIs combine selected KIESE indicators to track policy and system performance in education and VET in key areas such as access, quality, and system management. Where KIESE data is missing, the SPIs rely on expert surveys which help fill the gaps and contextualise the findings at the stage of analysis. 'Performance' in this context refers to the extent to which policies and systems deliver results in these areas<sup>2</sup>. In 2025, the ETF compiled SPIs for a total of 32 areas and sub-areas of performance, including for groups of learners such as youths and adults, males and females, socio-economically disadvantaged young people, and adults with no or low education.

ETF country missions complement these data sources by engaging with key policy stakeholders, gathering qualitative insights on policy developments, recently enacted legislation, and major reform steps. Finally, where necessary, the ETF draws on third-party publications and analytical work to complement gaps in available evidence or to clarify developments that are not fully captured in the ETF monitoring evidence.

The country fiche begins with Chapter 1, a country profile that describes the demographic and socio-economic conditions in the country. Chapter 2 presents recent policies in education and training, together with the structure of the education system, including adult learning. Chapter 3 provides an overview of employment and labour-market policies and introduces the main strategies, institutions, and programmes. Chapter 4, which is the final chapter, presents the results of policies and arrangements in education and training.

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<sup>1</sup> The full selection of KIESE indicators for 2025 can be found here: <https://bit.ly/4j6taZW>.

<sup>2</sup> The subset of KIESE indicators used for the calculation of the Torino Process SPIs in 2025 can be found here: <https://bit.ly/433OR8j>. The full list of questions used in the 2025 round of the Torino Process system performance monitoring can be found here: <https://bit.ly/3YUlbXE>. For a full overview of the Torino Process system performance monitoring framework, see: <https://bit.ly/47YGA6l>. The methodology for the calculation of the SPIs can be found here: <https://bit.ly/3XJq101>.

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# KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Country profile and developments:** Serbia is an EU candidate country with a population of 6.6 million people. While Serbs make up the majority, there are significant minority populations throughout the country. In demographic terms, Serbia is an ageing society and has high levels of emigration, mainly to EU countries. In November 2024, protests began after the collapse of the railway station canopy in Novi Sad, which killed 16 people and left one severely injured. By March 2025, the protests had spread to 400 cities and towns across Serbia. Pupils, students, teachers and professors have played a role in the ongoing protests, which may have had a considerable impact on education. This last year has also seen a change of Government, with the ruling party remaining in office. According to the latest survey on EU membership conducted in 2024, 40 % of Serbs were in favour, compared to 34 % who said they would vote against. EU policy dialogue and cooperation are ongoing despite no progress being recorded in the Enlargement Report. The Growth Plan and Reform Agenda are now, with the IPA (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance) funding mechanism, a key part of Serbia's efforts to join the EU, alongside the Stabilisation and Association Agreement activities.
- **Developments in education and training:** Despite the context of protests, some legislative and policy developments have taken place, and six new laws were adopted during the reporting period. This included the Laws on Adult Education and on VET, amendments of the Law on Primary Education, the Law on Textbooks for primary and secondary education, the Law on the National Qualification Framework and a Law amending the Law on Education Inspection with which the State Education Inspectorate became part of the Ministry. The national VET centre was renamed the Centre for development of VET. The new education strategy has also been drafted and there is a new adult education strategy. A rule book and occupational standards for career guidance practitioners and a national career management skills framework were also approved.
- **Employment and labour market developments:** Although the background of the protests has impacted employment and labour developments, the labour market has shown signs of gradual improvement in 2025. The unemployment rate has fallen to approximately 8.5 %, while labour force participation remains modest at around 56–57 %, as outlined by the Statistical Office of Serbia. Employment has risen slightly compared to the previous year, accompanied by a decline in both unemployment and inactivity. Nonetheless, labour supply is increasingly constrained by demographic factors, including low fertility, population ageing, and sustained emigration, particularly of younger and highly skilled workers. Sectoral dynamics reveal persistent mismatches between supply and demand. Growth in information technology, digital services, and manufacturing is in turn met by shortages of qualified labour, while a significant proportion of unemployed persons have only basic education.
- **Trends in access, retention, completion:** In Serbia, most 15-year-olds enter vocational schools (about 75 %), with only 25 % in general education. Gender participation is balanced, though girls dominate health and administration and boys, technical fields. Disadvantaged groups face barriers, as only 20 % of Roma children attend secondary school and only 64 % of them complete primary, compared to over 90 % nationally. Participation in adult learning is generally limited, standing at 5.5 % in 2024 (6.1 % for women vs 4.9 % for men), and is very low among older adults, standing at 1.7 % for the population aged 55-64. Retention is stronger in four-year VET and general tracks, while three-year programmes see higher dropout rates. In 2023/24, most graduates came from four-year VET tracks. Despite what seems to be more flexible pathways, fewer learners are progressing to higher education, transition into higher education is declining, and labour market integration remains more difficult for disadvantaged groups such as the Roma minority, although there has been some improvement since 2023.
- **Quality and relevance of learning:** The quality and relevance of learning in Serbia remains a concern, despite policy reforms made in recent years aimed at strengthening links between education and the labour market. Assessments such as the latest PISA 2022 international

benchmark survey show that Serbian students underperform compared to their OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) peers, with over one-third failing to reach basic proficiency in reading, mathematics and science. VET students, especially those in three-year programmes, show weaker results than their peers in four-year VET or general education. Adult learners tend to perform better in basic competences, though some decline in ICT skills has been noted. Alignment with labour market needs is improving but still limited. Employers report persistent skills mismatches: graduates are often overqualified but lack practical, job-specific, and digital skills. Recent VET graduates face employment rates of around 65.6 %, highlighting the very challenge in employability. To address this, Serbia is expanding dual education and work-based learning, while tertiary education continues to produce large numbers of graduates (more than 29 000 in 2024), though inequalities in access remain. System responsiveness is to some extent visible in curriculum updates, the development of a National Qualifications Framework, and efforts to embed key competencies.

- **System management and organisation:** In Serbia, financing and human resources for VET and lifelong learning have expanded in some respects, with investments in teacher training, dual education, and adult learning. However, schools still face shortages in modern equipment and digital tools as well as staffing gaps in delivering high-quality practical training. Data systems are relatively strong: the Qualifications Agency, Statistical Office, and education databases provide coverage, and information is set up to feed into decision making via the National Qualifications Framework and sector skills councils, though use of the evidence is uneven. Governance is covered by stakeholders including the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (MoE), the Office for Dual Education and the National Qualifications Framework national councils, and school boards, with principals granted some autonomy, while accountability is in principle maintained through quality assurance, evaluations, and inspections. Participation in adult learning remains modest (5.5 % in 2024, down from 6.1 % in 2023), but recognition of prior learning is being piloted. International cooperation, particularly through EU and donor programmes, supports the dual VET reform, curriculum development, NQF implementation, and the provision of equipment.

# 1. COUNTRY PROFILE

**Table 1.1 Demographic and socio-economic context: key indicators, Serbia**

Indicator	Value	Year	Source
Total population (in thousands)	6 623.2	2023	UN DESA, World Bank
Relative size of youth population (%)	16.2	2023	UN DESA
Population growth rate	-0.6	2023	World Bank, UN DESA
Dependency ratio	57.9	2023	World Bank, UN DESA
Immigrant stock as % of total population	10.6	2024	UN DESA
Emigrant stock as % of total population	14.3	2024	UN DESA
GDP growth rate	3.8	2023	World Bank
GDP per capita (PPP)	28 748.5	2023	World Bank
Migrant remittance inflows (USD mil.) as % of GDP	7.1	2023	World Bank
Inflation rate	12.4	2023	IMF
Poverty headcount ratio (USD 8.30/day)	10.3	2022	World Bank
Gini coefficient (Income inequality)	33.1	2021	World Bank
Human development index (HDI)	0.833	2023	UNDP, World Bank

Source: ETF KIESE database.

## 1.1 Demography

This section takes a look at a selection of indicators in Table 1.1 that describe the size and growth rate of the population, its age and economic structure, as well as the scale and impact of inward and outward migration on population size, composition, and skills availability.

Serbia had a population of approximately 6.62 million in 2023 (Table 1.1), which is shrinking at a rate of 0.6 % per year. About one in six Serbians (16.2 %) is aged between 15 and 24, which suggests that, in the coming years, education and the labour market may have to reckon with fewer students entering schools.

The dependency ratio in Serbia is high: nearly 58 dependants per 100 working-age adults as of 2023. This creates a strain on social protection and public finances which is substantial and could intensify if the working-age population continues to shrink.

The country was heavily impacted by the 2015 migrant crisis, and migration continues to influence the country's demography. Immigrants represented about 10.6 % of the population in 2024, which worked to offset some labour shortages. At the same time, 14.3 % of Serbian nationals (roughly one in seven people) live abroad, according to statistics. While this outward migration represents a loss of domestic talent, elsewhere it also creates opportunities through remittances, potential returnees, and inward investments from the diaspora.

## 1.2 Economy

The economic indicators in Table 1.1 suggest that Serbia's economy performed well in 2023, growing by around 3.8 %, which is a solid rate that exceeds that of many EU economies. However, inflation remained high at 12.4 %.

In 2023, Serbia's GDP per capita (PPP) stood at approximately USD 28 750. This makes Serbia one of the higher-income countries in the SEET (South Eastern Europe and Türkiye) region. At this level of economic development, further improvements in living standards and convergence with the EU

average will increasingly depend on higher productivity rather than merely catching up in income levels.

Unlike the economies of some other countries in the region, the Serbia's economy is not heavily dependent on diaspora funds. Remittances from Serbians living abroad contributed around 7.1 % of GDP in 2023, according to World Bank data.

### 1.3 Income and living standards

In Serbia, roughly one in ten people (10.3 %) live below the upper-middle-income poverty line of USD 8.30 (PPP) per day (2022). This is a relatively low level of poverty compared to other countries in the SEET region, but it still implies that a sizeable group of people remain vulnerable to rising prices and employment shocks.

There are indications that the benefits of economic growth in Serbia have not been distributed evenly over time. Although inequality remains moderate, the Gini coefficient of 33.1 in 2021 was slightly above the EU average, according to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (SORS). The Human Development Index (HDI) of Serbia stood at 0.833 in 2023, which places the country clearly within the 'very-high human-development' category. However, Serbia lags behind when measured against EU and OECD-level standards. Of the components covered by the HDI, the income dimension is where Serbia lags most significantly<sup>3</sup>. Serbia's Gross National Income (GNI) per capita (PPP) in 2023 was around USD 23 115, which is less than half of the OECD average (USD 52 700) and well below the EU average (USD 45 000).

### 1.4 Recent developments

A new Government was formed in May 2024, largely continuing on from the previous administration led by President Vucic's Serbian Progressive Party. From July 2024, the country saw widespread environmental protests against the Jadar mine and proposed lithium mining project by Rio Tinto in Western Serbia. Since the fatal collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy in November 2024, killing 16 people and injuring one, protests have intensified on a far larger scale, impacting the whole country for a protracted period. Another government was formed in April 2025, again led by the governing party and allies and with Đuro Macu as Prime Minister. The protests have had a considerable impact on the functioning of the education sector. The next presidential election is due in 2027.

According to the latest EU Enlargement Package for the country, Serbia is prepared in some areas, but some concerns were noted in different EU acquis chapters, including the rule of law and media freedom. The accession process is ongoing, but no acquis clusters have been opened for negotiation over the last 12 months. In that report, the European Commission restated that Serbia had fulfilled the benchmarks to open cluster 3 (Competitiveness and inclusive growth), also noting that Serbia still has to work on the implementation of EU-accession related reforms across the board. On the Growth Plan and Reform Agenda, Serbia has also been urged by the Commission to enhance its focus on meeting benchmarks.

<sup>3</sup> See [https://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2025\\_HDR/HDR25\\_Statistical\\_Annex\\_Tables\\_1-7.pdf#:~:text=62%20Serbia%200.8%20e%2030%2C975%20%E2%80%939%2066](https://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2025_HDR/HDR25_Statistical_Annex_Tables_1-7.pdf#:~:text=62%20Serbia%200.8%20e%2030%2C975%20%E2%80%939%2066), accessed on 6 July 2025.

## 2. EDUCATION AND TRAINING: POLICIES AND DEVELOPMENTS

### 2.1 Structure and levels of education, including VET

This section provides a brief description of how the education system is organised across different levels, including pre-primary, primary, secondary (distinguishing between general and vocational tracks), tertiary, and adult learning. It uses the UNESCO ISCED classification and is based on monitoring information collected through the Torino Process expert survey.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 2.1 Structure of the education system: Serbia (2025)**



Source: European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2021).

#### Formal education

Formal education in Serbia spans pre-school, primary, secondary, and higher education, with only pre-school and primary levels being compulsory. Adult education is also part of the formal system, enabling adults to complete unfinished schooling, gain new qualifications, or pursue advanced vocational training.

Pre-school education serves children from six months to six-and-a-half years. The compulsory preparatory pre-school programme, for children aged five-and-a-half to six-and-a-half, lasts nine months and is free of charge when offered by public kindergartens or schools.

Primary education lasts eight years and is structured into two cycles. The first cycle includes grades one to four, while the second covers grades five to eight. Specialised institutions such as primary music and ballet schools provide additional, non-compulsory programmes of shorter duration.

Secondary education is not compulsory and generally targets learners aged 15 to 19. It consists of two main pathways: four-year general academic education and three- or four-year vocational and art programmes. Admission depends on primary school completion, final exam performance, competitions, and student preferences. Entry into art schools also requires an exam assessing specialised skills. Vocational education increasingly integrates dual learning, combining school-based theory with workplace training aligned with standards developed by sectoral councils within the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Graduates of four-year schools may enrol directly in university, while those from three-year vocational programmes usually enter the labour market, though some may proceed to higher education after additional testing.

Higher education in Serbia includes academic and vocational study programmes delivered across three cycles: undergraduate, master's, and doctoral studies. Five types of institutions operate within the system: universities, faculties or art academies within universities, academies for vocational studies, colleges, and colleges for vocational studies. Universities mainly provide programmes through faculties and art academies, while the University of Belgrade also offers interdisciplinary master's and doctoral programmes. Academies and colleges for vocational studies deliver vocational qualifications, whereas colleges provide undergraduate and master's academic degrees but not doctorates. Since

<sup>4</sup> The full questionnaire can be found here: <https://bit.ly/418jfwC>. In this document, the survey may be referred to interchangeably as the 'monitoring survey', 'expert survey', or 'Torino Process monitoring survey'.

the adoption of the Bologna Process in 2003 and the 2005 Law on Higher Education, all programmes follow the three-cycle structure, use ECTS credits, and issue diploma supplements.

## Adult learning

Adult learning in Serbia encompasses formal, non-formal, and informal education, offering adults opportunities to complete unfinished schooling, acquire new qualifications, or gain skills for employment and personal development. It includes structured programmes within the formal system as well as flexible learning pathways delivered through various public and private providers.

Formal adult education covers primary and secondary programmes, first-time qualification pathways, training for skilled workers and master craftspeople, and specialised vocational courses. Primary adult education lasts three to five years, organised into three cycles, with vocational skills integrated into the final cycle. Secondary adult education typically spans two to three years and enables adults to complete previously interrupted education. Adults may also pursue re-skilling or up-skilling through longer qualification pathways. Those with a secondary school diploma and at least two years of work experience can enrol in advanced vocational training lasting six months to two years, leading to a Level 5 qualification within the National Qualifications Framework. Further work on the recognition of prior learning is being piloted.

Non-formal adult education is mainly delivered by the National Employment Service as part of active labour market measures under the Employment Strategy (2021–2026). These include vocational traineeships, apprenticeships for unemployed youth with secondary or higher education, and employer-oriented training programmes. Key youth-focused initiatives include ‘My First Salary’, ‘Talents in the Public Sector’, and the Youth Guarantee, launched in January 2024 in Niš, Kruševac, and Sremska Mitrovica with EU, ETF and International Labour Organization (ILO) support.

Informal learning occurs through everyday activities, workplace experience, self-directed study, and community-based engagement. Although not certified, it significantly contributes to adult competencies and employability.

Accredited adult education providers — known as organisers of adult education (JPOA) — include primary and secondary schools, adult education centres, vocational training institutions, and other approved organisations. According to the Qualifications Agency, 852 accredited programmes were registered at the time of monitoring. The ETF will be focusing on the sector with an upcoming factsheet on Adult Learning in 2026.

## 2.2 Strategy and legal framework

Despite the year of protests, the National Assembly adopted amendments to the Law on Higher Education in March 2025, with the aim of improving the quality and promoting the relevance of higher education by securing additional budget funds for higher education, and of strengthening the autonomy of universities by reducing the government’s representation. In terms of innovations, the adopted law aimed to introduce the obligation of the state to provide funds for the accreditation costs of study programmes and institutions in Serbia, as well as the costs of relevant international academic accreditations.

Amendments to the law also aimed to introduce micro credentials for the professional training of individuals with secondary or higher education, in line with growing labour market needs, such as with lifelong learning programmes. Each subject in the micro credentials is expressed in terms of the corresponding ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) credits, and the scope of the programme is expressed as the sum of ECTS credits.

In July 2025 the Government adopted a bill on amendments to the Law on Textbooks. This was described as being aimed at preserving national identity and developing a sense of belonging. However, some pointed to risks that this may have reinforced centralised political control in the sector

with negative consequences. In a sudden development, this draft law was abandoned by the Government in October 2025, for reasons which were unclear.

## General education

The Serbian Strategy for the Development of Education by 2030, adopted in 2021, sets out a comprehensive reform agenda covering pre-university and higher education. Its main objectives are to improve quality, accessibility, relevance, and equity across all levels of education, while strengthening alignment with labour market needs and international standards. Key priorities include digital transformation, teacher development, inclusive education, and lifelong learning.

A central element of the strategy is the creation of a Unified Information System of Education (JISP), intended to enhance data management, transparency, and evidence-based policymaking. Digital transformation is another core focus, involving investments in ICT infrastructure, digital learning resources, and the development of teachers' digital competences and innovative teaching methodologies. Accessibility and equity are addressed through measures aimed at removing barriers to participation and ensuring equal access to quality education regardless of socio-economic background or geographic location. Quality improvement is pursued through the development of learning outcomes and achievement standards, alongside actions to strengthen educational institutions. The objective is also to align curricula and programmes more closely with labour market and societal needs. Teacher development is recognised with an emphasis on continuous professional development, digital literacy, and modern pedagogical approaches. The strategy prioritises international alignment, seeking to harmonise national legislation and practices with EU and UN frameworks. Adult education is integral to the JISP notably through the introduction of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), supported by pilot initiatives enabling adults to obtain qualifications based on non-formal and informal learning. Issues around Career guidance and counselling are highlighted in the JISP. Inclusive education is promoted through Individualised Education Plans and targeted support for learners with disabilities.

The strategy is complemented by the Youth Strategy 2023–2030, supported by sequential action plans, while lifelong learning is embedded as a national priority across education and employment policies. The National Qualifications Framework of Serbia (NQFS) is part of this too as an integrated system for qualifications from formal, non-formal, and informal learning. Bylaws outline methodologies for developing qualification standards, ensuring transparency and comparability.

## Vocational education

The Vocational Education and Training (VET) system in Serbia is based on the 2018 Law on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which is linked to NQFS. The NQFS includes eight levels with four sublevels and defines four qualification types: general (basic and secondary education), vocational education and adult education, academic (higher education), and vocational higher education. The NQFS Council oversees strategic management, advising on human capital planning, lifelong learning, employment, and career guidance, supported administratively by the Qualifications Agency. Sector Skills Councils identify labour market needs, and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is applied at levels 1, 2, 3, and 5. Serbia participates in the EQF Advisory Group, with the NQFS having been referenced to the EQF in 2020.

The Law on Dual Education (2017) integrates classroom learning with practical workplace training. Students spend part of their time in companies under legally binding contracts, earning at least 70 % of the minimum wage. Companies must be accredited, and licensed instructors supervise practical training. Dual education allocates 20–80 % of vocational hours to practical experience and emphasises career guidance and counselling.

The VET system is increasingly incorporating green and digital skills, and adult education programmes offer opportunities for basic skills, professional qualifications and continuing education. As noted also in this report, Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) are present in Serbia and promote high-quality skills, innovation and regional development.

Quality assurance initiatives standardise in-company learning, with vocational practical coordinators ensuring training quality. Continuous professional development supports effective instruction. The NQF, dual education, CoVEs, and related reforms align with the Education Development Strategy 2030, enhancing accessibility, quality, and relevance across pre-university and higher education. These initiatives collectively foster a flexible, lifelong learning-oriented VET system that meets evolving labour market, technological and societal demands.

## 2.3 Main actors and governance

### National level

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (hereinafter the ‘Ministry of Education’) has overall responsibility for education also oversees the VET system, which falls under the secondary education sector. Several related state bodies also work under or alongside the Ministry, including the Institute for the Advancement of Education, the Institute for the Evaluation of the Quality of Education, and the Qualifications Agency.

The Ministry of Education works with the Office for Dual Education and the National Qualifications Framework (hereafter the Office for Dual Education). The main activities of the Office include developing plans in the field of dual education, and implementing measures taken in this field by other state bodies. The Office prepares drafts of laws and bylaws on dual education in secondary and higher education, career guidance and counselling, as well as on the NQFS. The responsibilities of the Office also include monitoring the application of the legal framework in the area and evaluating the effects of the introduction of dual education in secondary vocational education, higher education and the NQFS in accordance with various strategic documents. The Ministry of Youth also plays a role in the wider education context. In principle the Office for Dual Education and the Ministry of Education also cooperate with the Ministry of Labour in the wider skills context.

The Qualifications Agency is the central body for Serbia’s National Qualifications Framework, responsible for coordinating standards, managing the National Qualifications Register, and aligning the framework with EU standards. Established in 2018, it also acts as the ENIC/NARIC centre for foreign qualifications recognition, supporting skills development, quality assurance, and the recognition of non-formal learning in cooperation with the Ministry of Education.

The Finance, Labour and Youth Ministries are also relevant stakeholders, as are social partners, academia and civil society.

### International level: donors

International donors play an important role in supporting Serbia’s education sector. The European Union (EU) is the largest donor, reflecting Serbia’s accession context, funding national, regional, and multi-country projects. Since 2003, and also in the current Multi annual Financial Framework (MFF) the EU has contributed over EUR 130 million to education reforms through IPA financial assistance. EU support has always aimed to combine policy dialogue and investment, with an increasing focus on education, labour market reform and skills development. An important Budget Support project in Education is currently ongoing. The Growth Plan and Reform Agenda (since 2023) now guide cooperation, subsuming the previous Economic Reform Programme. Other EU mechanisms, such as the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and the annual Enlargement Package, remain central. Serbia is also active in the Erasmus programme.

The European Investment Bank (EIB) is an important actor, as it invests in digitalisation and school modernisation, supporting curriculum development, teacher training, and infrastructure. Current EIB investments amount to EUR 65 million, focusing on digital equipment, connectivity, and capacity-building for teachers. The ETF is a key actor and works closely with EU colleagues (in Brussels and at the EU Delegation) and national authorities across digital, green, and VET policy areas as well as with the Youth Guarantee.

Other actors include Swiss Cooperation, which supports Dual VET and Education to Employment (E2E), the World Bank, which focuses on early childhood education, learning outcomes, and school finance systems, and the EBRD, which is engaged in education and skills development alongside its other investments. The Council of Europe Development Bank invests in training facilities and migrant education initiatives. UNICEF and other UN bodies promote access to quality education for children from vulnerable groups, including refugees, and support digital education and inclusive practices. Bilateral donors, including EU Member States and other countries, support civil society organisations in education. In particular, GiZ (Germany) strengthens vocational education and workforce skills. Regional cooperation is promoted via the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the regional education ERI SEE platform, including funding from the Regional Challenge Fund, KfW, and other development agencies. Since the United States has had limited input in this sector, the ongoing changes in terms of external aid will have potentially less impact on the sector. This may change as from 2026 with regard to UN financing.

## 2.4 Policies and developments

### Overview

Notwithstanding the context of protests over the past year, Serbia remains focused on education reform and wider institutional modernisation. The country is aiming to pursue general improvements in education and VET to enhance quality, align itself with EU standards, and meet labour market needs. Serbia's education system includes compulsory and free primary education, followed by optional secondary education comprising general and vocational tracks, and higher education.

The Strategy for the Development of Education 2030 is central, aiming to improve education quality, align curricula with EU standards, and make VET responsive to labour market demands. Efforts focus on increasing enrolment, raising learning outcomes, and modernising learning environments through digitalisation. The expansion of adult education supports lifelong learning, while teacher training and professional development remain priorities to cultivate a skilled and adaptable workforce. Integration of private sector perspectives and entrepreneurship into the national education system is still limited.

From a gender perspective, Serbia achieves near parity in primary and secondary enrolment, with women slightly overrepresented in higher education. Girls outperform boys academically and have lower dropout rates, particularly in fields such as social sciences, education and health. Policy frameworks, including the Gender Equality Strategy 2021–2030 and gender-responsive budgeting, support equality. However, gender segregation persists in STEM, ICT, and technical vocational programmes, reinforced by stereotypes in curricula and career guidance. Roma girls and those from rural or low-income backgrounds face additional barriers, including early marriage and limited access to secondary or higher education. High female educational attainment does not fully translate into labour market equality, as women remain underrepresented in technical and leadership roles and experience a gender pay gap.

Roma communities face challenges: only 28 % complete elementary school, 8 % complete secondary school, and less than 1 % attain higher education. Barriers include poverty, lack of documentation, discrimination, low preschool participation, and overrepresentation in special schools. Inclusive education and anti-discrimination measures remain critical to ensure equal opportunities.

Education for persons with disabilities has improved over the past decade, with most children attending mainstream schools supported by Individual Education Plans and additional services. Legal frameworks, including the Law on the Foundations of the Education System and the Strategy for Improving the Position of Persons with Disabilities 2025–2030, promote inclusion. Nonetheless, gaps persist, for instance in teacher training, school accessibility, and equitable provision, especially in rural areas, with specialised schools still serving children with complex needs. Full inclusion and high-quality support remain ongoing challenges.

## Qualifications, validation and recognition

As of 2025, the Law on the National Qualifications Framework of Serbia, adopted in April 2018, is the main legal act underpinning the NQFS. Amendments to the NQFS law were adopted in early 2020. The Law on the Foundations of the Education System, the Law on Higher Education and the Law on Adult Education are consistent with the NQFS. It has 8 levels, with two sub-levels each at levels 6 and 7 and includes four types of qualifications: general and vocational qualifications covering pre-university education, and academic and professional qualifications covering higher education.

The Qualifications Agency maintains a register of approximately 4 000 qualifications, ensuring quality across levels, coordinating with international bodies, supporting Sector Skills Councils, and referencing the NQFS to the European Qualifications Framework. Together, these measures enhance the education system, promoting lifelong learning, labour market relevance, and alignment with European standards. In 2024, the ETF carried out a review and inventory of the framework<sup>5</sup>.

In terms of validation and recognition, the Law on Adult Education defines non-formal education as 'organised learning processes for adults based on specialised programmes aimed at acquiring knowledge, values, attitudes, abilities and skills that facilitate personal development of adults, enhance their labour, employment and social engagement' and informal learning as 'the process of independent acquisition of knowledge, values, attitudes and skills that occurs in everyday life, the workplace and social environments'. The process of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is defined by the Law on the Education System Foundations. The law stipulates that qualifications can be acquired through formal or non-formal education or through the recognition of prior learning. The ETF has made an inventory of the National Qualifications Framework of Serbia (NQFS) during 2025<sup>6</sup>.

The discussion around integration with ESCO is growing<sup>7</sup>. ESCO plays a role in strengthening links between education, training, and the labour market by providing a common, multilingual reference language for skills, competences and occupations. It supports the description of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes, helping to reduce skills mismatches and improve labour market relevance. ESCO also supports curriculum development, skills intelligence, career guidance, and personalised learning pathways, as well as the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

## Work-based learning

Serbia has introduced several VET reform initiatives in the last decade, so that, within the current system, students are presented with different 'types' of educational profiles. A number of so-called pilot profiles have a modernised syllabus and are based on qualification standards but are still in an 'experimental' phase and will undergo evaluation before being cancelled or mainstreamed into the regular system and losing the 'pilot' prefix. Some profiles were 'pilots' but have been mainstreamed into the regular system over the years, which means that their syllabus has been modernised and they are based on qualification standards, but it is impossible to distinguish between these and the traditional non-modernised profiles.

In addition to the traditional profiles, three profiles were introduced into the system as part of a significant VET project led by GIZ, along with 16 newly developed or adapted profiles that are considered 'pure' dual profiles, and a group of profiles with strong elements of dual education – profiles where students' professional practice is conducted to the largest extent possible within companies. This means that only the last two groups of profiles have a mandatory work-based learning element, but regarding the remaining profiles, students' professional practice may be conducted as work-based learning. The ETF has carried out a type of mapping of this area in 2024 and 2025<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> [www.etf.europa.eu/en/document-attachments/national-qualifications-framework-serbia-0](http://www.etf.europa.eu/en/document-attachments/national-qualifications-framework-serbia-0).

<sup>6</sup> Idem [National qualifications framework – Serbia | ETF](#).

<sup>7</sup> [Qualifications | European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations \(ESCO\)](#).

<sup>8</sup> [www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-09/WBL-Serbia-edited\\_clean.pdf](http://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-09/WBL-Serbia-edited_clean.pdf).

## Career guidance

Serbia's career guidance system, established in 2010, spans the education, employment and youth sectors, aiming to provide comprehensive support for career decision-making at all life stages. This remains the case with some small modifications since 2022. The public employment agency plays a central role, offering career services for Information and Professional Guidance (CIPS), including support for individuals with disabilities and school-aged children. Secondary schools, in particular, provide career guidance through teachers, psychologists and pedagogues, and recent amendments in educational law emphasise the importance of career guidance.

At university level, career centres provide workshops, counselling and internships in collaboration with the business community. Local youth offices, supported by various projects, focus on career-related information for youth, with NGOs running career centres for young job seekers. Additionally, online platforms also offer self-assessment tools and career advice.

Career guidance is underpinned by national policies such as the Education Development Strategy (2012), which aimed at developing a career guidance system by 2020, and later laws (2013–2017) strengthened its integration in schools. The National Employment Strategy (2021–2026) focuses on standardising career services across sectors, while the Youth Strategy (2015–2025) highlights career guidance for youth. Training for career guidance practitioners is key. Public employment service counsellors are trained in psychology, while teachers and school staff attend seminars and workshops. Recent research and the Bylaw on Standards of Career Guidance (2019) provide guidelines for improving services and ensuring quality.

The existing standards are in the process of being updated during 2025 and 2026 after a long coordination process. It is suggested that this will be a stepping stone to further review and evolution in the coming years.

## Quality assurance

The Law on the NQFS provided for the creation of a Qualifications Agency, with the aim of providing quality on all levels of development and implementing the National Qualifications Framework (NQFS). To ensure the synchronised and efficient development and implementation of the NQFS and the application of the partnership principle in the development of the NQFS, special bodies and institutions had to be established. The NQFS Council, a representative body, was also authorised for the system management and composed of the representatives of the relevant interested parties. The Qualifications Agency performs a range of functions and duties, such as coordinating and supporting the NQFS Council, cooperating with relevant international bodies and institutions and referencing the NQFS with the European Qualifications Framework, coordinating the Sector Skills councils, and supporting the development of Qualifications Standards. The Qualifications Agency also supports the implementation and maintenance of the National Qualifications Register.

The Qualifications Agency oversees qualification standards across education (mostly in VET), including sector skills councils, registries, recognition of non-Serbian (foreign) diplomas, career guidance, accreditation of non-formal education. It also oversees quality assurance in higher education (standardisation and accreditation of universities, faculties, study programmes, plus external and internal evaluations).

The National Entity for Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education is an independent state agency mainly funded from accreditation fees paid by higher education institutions. It is the national institution in charge of external quality evaluation of higher education institutions. It was established by the Law on Higher Education (2017) as the legal successor of the Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance, which had conducted quality assessment processes for over a decade.

## Centres of excellence

Serbia is developing Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) to enhance vocational education and training (VET) and foster innovation, particularly through public-private partnerships. These centres

aim to improve the school-to-work transition, increase the qualifications of employees, and boost the competitiveness of the economy. They also focus on aligning VET with the specific needs of the local economy and promoting lifelong learning.

CoVEs are designed to facilitate collaborations between educational institutions, regional authorities, public employment services, and private companies. They focus on providing skills that are in demand by local industries, ensuring that training is relevant and practical. CoVEs also play a role in supporting innovation and research and development (R&D) at the company level, often providing expertise and support for companies in these areas. This is an area where the ETF is actively supporting the international dimension of CoVEs, encouraging collaboration and the sharing of best practices at both national and international levels, as demonstrated by the ETF's Network for Excellence (ENE). The ETF plays an important role in fostering the principles underpinning CoVEs, alongside a range of EU, national, regional and other partners.

## Digital education and skills

Digital education in Serbia is guided by the Strategy for Digital Skills Development (2020–2024) and supported by several complementary initiatives. The Connected Schools Programme is a central measure, providing schools with reliable internet access and modern digital equipment. Digital education is also a core pillar of the Strategy for the Development of Education and Upbringing. Together, these initiatives aim to strengthen digital infrastructure, enhance teachers' digital competencies, and develop students' digital skills. According to the Ministry of Education, the programme targets over 3 800 schools, benefiting more than 730 000 students and around 100 000 teachers through equipment provision and targeted training.

Serbia has advanced its Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) for 2020–2027, focusing on four priority areas: ICT, food for the future, machines and production processes of the future, and creative industries. The 2023–2025 Action Plan builds on earlier implementation, with over 70 % of planned activities completed. Programmes such as the Innovation Fund's 'Smart Start' and regional initiatives like 'Smart Vojvodina' support balanced innovation, though challenges persist, including low R&D investment, limited private-sector engagement, and regional disparities. Education and skills development remain central to the S3 framework, with measures to modernise curricula, promote reskilling and upskilling, and better align learning with labour market and innovation needs. Strengthened monitoring of employability, lifelong learning, and industry involvement in curricula could enhance the impact of the next S3 cycle beyond 2027.

Challenges remain, particularly the need for continued investment in infrastructure in rural and underserved areas to ensure equitable access. Ongoing professional development for teachers is crucial to integrate digital technologies effectively into teaching. Digital education could also be more systematically embedded across all subjects and levels, rather than treated as a standalone discipline, to strengthen overall digital literacy.

## Green transition

Serbia is committed to a green transition, focusing on increasing renewable energy, improving energy efficiency, and promoting sustainable development. The country aims to achieve a renewable energy share of 45 % by 2030, though challenges remain, particularly its reliance on fossil fuels, especially coal, and the need for significant investments in green technologies and infrastructure. In addition to donor support, Serbia is encouraging commercial bank participation and exploring diverse financing models to support green projects. The transition is thus a multifaceted process, with ambitious goals, international support, and ongoing efforts to shift towards sustainability.

Over the past year, Serbia has advanced reforms aligned with European priorities for the digital and green transitions, implementing the Osnabrück Declaration. The National Implementation Plan and the Education Strategy 2030 provide a framework for these reforms, which include modernising curricula and qualifications to match labour market needs, strengthening institutions like the Office for Dual Education and the National Qualifications Framework, expanding dual and work-based learning,

enhancing digital skills in VET programmes, and promoting lifelong learning pathways. Quality assurance, stakeholder engagement, and social partnership remain central, ensuring closer cooperation between education providers, employers, and policy institutions. Serbia regularly reports on progress through the ETF Osnabrück monitoring process.

Serbia has also agreed to follow the Herning Declaration (2025), replacing Osnabrück as the European framework for VET cooperation for 2026–2030. Herning builds on prior reforms, addressing AI, demographic change, inclusion, and skills shortages, while promoting measurable goals, stronger stakeholder engagement, lifelong learning, and learner mobility.<sup>9</sup>

## Adult Learning

The Law on Adult Education in Serbia has as its mandate the provision to adults of continuous opportunities to acquire competences and qualifications essential for employment, professional development, and socially responsible behaviour. Its objectives include enhancing citizens' educational attainment and employability, supporting socio-economic development, increasing professional mobility and labour-market flexibility, reducing poverty and inequality, promoting social inclusion and intergenerational solidarity, and improving personal, family, and environmental well-being.

Adult education encompasses formal, non-formal, and informal learning. Formal programmes follow national curricula in primary and secondary education, regulated by the Law on the Foundations of the Education System. Two main types exist: general education, strengthening basic skills and key competences, and vocational education, enabling adults to obtain recognised qualifications. Provision also includes vocational training, professional development, recognition of prior learning, and career guidance. Several programmes are funded by state and local budgets, particularly adult primary education and vocational courses leading to initial qualifications. Serbia also participates in EPAL, the European platform for adult learning cooperation and knowledge exchange.

Despite this framework, participation in adult education remains low. Around one-fifth of adults aged 25–69 engage in formal or non-formal learning each year, which is below the EU average. Participation is higher among women and younger adults, with non-formal learning dominating. Key challenges include limited local programme availability, weak employer engagement, financial barriers, uneven access to information and guidance, and variable quality and labour-market relevance. Mechanisms for recognising prior learning exist, but uptake is limited.

Progress is evident through the Education Development Strategy to 2030, which reinforces lifelong learning as a strategic priority, expands recognition of non-formal and informal learning, and benefits from sustained EU and donor support. Participation levels have stabilised, providing a foundation for future growth and development.

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<sup>9</sup> [New declaration to strengthen European cooperation on vocational education and training.](#)

## 3. LABOUR MARKET AND EMPLOYMENT: POLICIES AND DEVELOPMENTS

### 3.1 Strategy and legal framework

Serbia's labour market and employment policies are guided by the National Employment Strategy 2021–2026 and the Action Plan for Employment 2024–2026. These frameworks define national objectives, including: (1) creating and increasing high-quality employment through cross-sectoral measures that strengthen labour supply and demand; (2) improving the labour market position of unemployed persons; and (3) strengthening the institutional framework for employment policy. The Action Plan also sets out planning and financing priorities for ALMMs.

Serbia is undertaking a labour law reform aimed at modernising the labour market and aligning legislation more closely with EU standards, in line with EU accession ambitions and negotiations under Chapter 19 of the acquis. The reform is expected to address issues such as fixed-term contracts, overtime work, employee rights and benefits, introduce more flexible forms of work, and further digitalise labour market procedures.

Serbia, alongside other Western Balkans economies, has begun implementing the Youth Guarantee (YG) scheme with EU and international support. The initiative seeks to reduce the share of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET). For young people aged 15–29, the NEET rate stood at around 14.9 % in 2024, down slightly from approximately 15.2 % in 2023, but still above the EU average of 13.7 % according to the national Statistical Office. For the narrower 15–24 age group, the NEET rate increased slightly from around 12.4 % in 2023 to approximately 12.9 % in 2024. This suggests that, despite overall labour market resilience, structural challenges persist in school-to-work transitions, access to quality education and training, and inclusive employment opportunities.

NEET rates are unevenly distributed geographically and socially. Higher rates are observed in southern, eastern and western regions compared to Belgrade and Vojvodina, and among vulnerable groups such as Roma communities. Previous data also indicate higher NEET rates among young people aged 25–29. These trends underline the need for targeted youth employment policies, stronger vocational pathways, improved career guidance, and better alignment between education, training and labour market needs. UNICEF data from 2022 found that young women had a slightly higher unemployment rate, which was also evident from ILO data for the same period.

### 3.2 Main actors and governance

#### National level

In Serbia the main responsibility in the sector is held by the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs (hereinafter the 'Ministry of Labour').

In 2025 the Ministry of Labour comprised the following departments, reflecting its wider priorities: the Department for labour and employment; the Department for retirement, pensions and disability insurance; the Department for the protection of disabled veterans; the Department for social protection; the Department for the protection of persons with disabilities; and the Department for financial and analytical affairs. The Ministry also has a department for international cooperation, European integration, and projects and a department for development and planning.

The Ministry of Education and the Office for Dual Education and the National Qualifications Framework (NQFS) work alongside the Ministry of Labour.

The Serbian National Employment Service (NES) is the public employment service. It provides a range of services to both job seekers and employers, including job placement assistance, career guidance, and information on active labour market programmes.

In addition, ministries such as the Ministry of Youth have an equally relevant role to play along with other state bodies such as the Qualifications Agency. Employers' associations and trade unions also have a key role to play as social partners, as do academia and expert groups and related civil society organisations. In principle, the Ministry of Labour also cooperates with the Ministry of Education in the wider skills context.

### International level: donors

Donor support in Serbia focuses on improving the labour market, particularly for youth and vulnerable groups, by enhancing skills, promoting entrepreneurship and supporting local economic development. This includes national projects, as well as multi-country, regional and international initiatives. Key areas of support include strengthening local governance, increasing competitiveness and fostering social inclusion. The EU has increasingly emphasised education, labour market reform and skills development, reflected in the Western Balkans Strategy, the EU Economic and Investment Plan, and, from 2023, the Growth Plan and Reform Agenda. This strategy aims to accelerate EU integration and boost the economy through deeper integration with the EU Single Market.

The EU is the main donor and policy actor, providing financial assistance and technical expertise, primarily through the IPA. Support focuses on legislative alignment, institutional strengthening, and education and training reforms to match labour market needs. Examples include Twinning projects such as 'Support to improving working conditions and preparing the Republic of Serbia to participate in EURES', which help align domestic legislation, draft new laws, and strengthen consultative mechanisms with social partners. Serbia is also preparing to implement the EU Sector Operational Programme to support EU membership readiness.

The European Investment Bank (EIB) supports social inclusion, job creation, and broader infrastructure, innovation, green transition, and SME development, including via the EFSD+ financial guarantee mechanism. The UN, particularly the International Labour Organization (ILO), contributes to youth employment initiatives like the Youth Guarantee and partners with the EU and ETF. Other donors include Swiss Cooperation, supporting Dual VET and the innovative Education to Employment (E2E) programme, and the World Bank, providing policy analysis and labour market reform support.

The EBRD invests in digitalisation, green technologies, and sustainable retail, supporting private sector growth, competitiveness, and skills development, particularly in the green economy. EU Member States, UN agencies, and other donors support civil society organisations in skills development and labour market initiatives. GiZ, the German cooperation agency, has long contributed to improving VET, promoting sustainable growth, and enhancing workforce skills. Serbia also cooperates regionally through the Regional Cooperation Council's Employment and Social Affairs Platform and the regional ERI SEE (Education Reform Initiative of South East Europe office) and actively participates in WorldSkills Europe events. Funding changes from the United States may further impact Serbia's labour market and related UN programmes from 2026 onwards.

## 3.3 Policies and developments

### Overview

Despite political and social challenges, including recent protests, Serbia remains committed to labour market reform, skills development, and institutional reform as part of its economic policies and EU accession agenda. As of 2024, employment policies are guided by the National Employment Strategy 2021–2026 and the Action Plan for Employment 2024–2026, focusing on creating high-quality jobs, improving the position of the unemployed, and strengthening institutional frameworks. Key measures include ALMMs, labour law modernisation aligned with EU standards, flexible work arrangements, and the Youth Guarantee scheme for NEET youth. The reforms prioritise vocational pathways, career guidance, and social and regional inclusion, supported by EU and international assistance.

The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia highlights persistent gender and social inequalities in the labour market. Women's labour force participation is around 63 %, lower than that of men, with a

gender pay gap of 8.8–15 % and underrepresentation in leadership roles and in technical sectors. Barriers include unpaid care work, traditional gender roles, and limited access to childcare and flexible work arrangements. Employment among Roma communities remains low at approximately 21 %, concentrated in informal and low-paid work, particularly affecting Roma women. The Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma 2022–2030 aims to improve access, encourage affirmative hiring, and promote broader inclusion.

Persons with disabilities face challenges, with employment rates around 9 %, hindered by inaccessible workplaces, stigma, and limited vocational opportunities. National strategies (2021–2030) support inclusion, workplace adaptation, and retraining, but gaps persist, especially for women with disabilities. Targeted policies are needed to address structural inequalities, align education and skills with labour market demands, and expand training and inclusive workplace opportunities.

## Youth Guarantee

Serbia is amongst the partners in the Western Balkans working to introduce the Youth Guarantee (YG) scheme, which supports young people aged 15–29 who register as jobseekers for the first time. Support takes the form of employment, continuous education and training or inclusion in active employment programmes within four months after registration. This was originally part of the EU's Economic and Investment Plan for the Region and is now linked to the EU's Growth Plan and Reform Agenda process.

This is part of a broader effort to align Serbia's youth employment policies with those of the EU and its Member States and is specifically focused on ensuring that young people receive a job offer, continued education, apprenticeship, or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or finishing their education. The pilot programme is being conducted in Kruševac, Sremska Mitrovica, and Niš and a financial assistance agreement of EUR 5.5 million will come from IPA/EU funds. The National Employment Strategy for the period 2021–2026, the Youth Strategy adopted in January 2023 and the Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan adopted in late December 2023, outline the steps for the programme's rollout from 2023 to 2026, including mapping and early intervention, outreach, preparation and provision. The Support Measures are planned to cover job search training, career guidance and counselling services, as well as financial incentives for employers who hire young people with a longer-term goal of improving their employability and facilitating their integration into the labour market through skills.

## 3.4 Active labour market programmes (ALMPs)

ALMPs are primarily implemented by the National Employment Service (NES) as part of the country's employment policy. These measures aim to increase employment and reduce unemployment through targeted programmes and projects, often delivered in cooperation with domestic and international partners. The NES provides a range of labour market services and measures, including employment mediation, counselling, motivation training, active job search, vocational orientation, and career guidance. Labour market measures support self-employment, the creation of new jobs through direct incentives, digital skills and HR training, traineeships, public and care work, and green-focused employment initiatives.

A priority is youth under 30, with subsidies offered to employers hiring unqualified or long-term unemployed youth, or those previously in state care. These incentives aim to reduce long-term unemployment and strengthen youth employment opportunities. ETF data for 2024 indicate that the registered unemployed population decreased by 10 % to 371 187, of which around 60 % were women and 18 % were aged under 30. Among the registered unemployed population, half hold medium-level qualifications and 35 % low-level qualifications, highlighting structural mismatches with labour market demand, which is concentrated in medium- and high-skill occupations. According to national data, the NES concluded over 700 000 individual activation plans, delivered 100 000 active job search services, and implemented almost 30 000 career counselling sessions. More than 8 000 people took part in subsidised employment initiatives, while the number of entrepreneurship incentives reached over

12 000. However, participation in additional education and training fell to just over 4 000 persons, underscoring the need for remedial education and skills development, particularly for the 35 % of jobseekers with low educational attainment (ISCED 0–2).

The National Employment Service plans, implements and monitors employment policies working with social partners, including employers and worker representatives. Addressing regional disparities remains a priority, focusing on job creation in underdeveloped areas rather than relying solely on worker mobility. The Youth Guarantee will be central to the further development of ALMPs, supporting youth employment and ensuring that Serbia's labour market policies remain responsive to sectoral transformations. Strengthened collaboration between NES offices, education institutions, and training providers is critical to aligning skills development with labour market demand and improving employment prospects across the country.

## 4. KEY INDICATORS: EDUCATION, SKILLS, EMPLOYMENT

### 4.1 Headline indicators

#### Education and VET

Monitoring a complex education and training system typically starts with three straightforward questions: who takes part, what do they achieve, and what supports the process?

The first question explores the extent to which learners engage in education or training. It is addressed by indicators grouped under *Participation and access* in Table 4.1: net enrolment rates at lower and upper secondary levels, the share of students in upper-secondary VET, the gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education, and adult participation rates in lifelong learning. The second question – what learners achieve – examines key education outcomes, such as learner progression and the skills or qualifications they obtain. These are reflected in the indicators under *Attainment, completion and outcomes*: the share of adults with tertiary qualifications, the rate of early leavers from education and training, and the percentage of 15-year-olds underachieving in mathematics. The third question considers the financial, physical, and informational resources that sustain the education process, reflected by the indicators under *Resources and data*: public expenditure on education as a share of GDP, the adequacy of infrastructure, and the availability of internationally comparable data.

**Table 4.1: Headline indicators: education and VET (Serbia, EU average) (2022–2024)**

<b>Participation and access</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>2024</b>	<b>EU (1)</b>	<b>Source</b>
Total net enrolment rate (lower secondary)	99.9	M.D.	M.D.	98.1	UIS UNESCO
Total net enrolment rate (upper secondary)	88.3	M.D.	M.D.	93.6	UIS UNESCO
Students in VET as a % of total upper secondary students	72.7	M.D.	M.D.	48.8	UIS UNESCO
Gross enrolment ratio (tertiary)	72.0	73.2	M.D.	79.7	UIS UNESCO
Participation in training/lifelong learning in the previous 4 weeks (% aged 25-64)	5.1	6.1	5.5	13.3	LFS
<b>Attainment, completion and outcomes</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>2024</b>	<b>EU (1)</b>	<b>Source</b>
Educational attainment of total population: % with ISCED 5-8	21.5	22.2	23.4	30.2	LFS
Early leavers from education and training (% aged 18–24)	5.7	5.8	6.2	9.3	LFS
Underachievers in maths (% aged 15)	43.1	N.A.	N.A.	31.1	PISA OECD
<b>Resources and data</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>2024</b>	<b>EU (1)</b>	<b>Source</b>
Public expenditure on education (as % of GDP)	3.2	M.D.	M.D.	4.7	UIS UNESCO
Inadequate or poor-quality physical infrastructure (2)	35.1	N.A.	N.A.	27.9	PISA OECD
Availability of internationally comparable data on education	N.A.	59.4	72.6	N.A.	TRP (3)

Notes: 1. EU average, latest available year. PISA data: OECD average. 2. Percentage of students in schools whose principal reported that the school's capacity to provide instruction is hindered at least to some extent by inadequate or poor-quality physical infrastructure. 3. ETF Torino Process (TRP).

Source: ETF KIESE database.

Participation in compulsory education in Serbia is virtually universal. In 2022, the lower-secondary enrolment rate reached 99.9 %, which means that nearly all students in the relevant age group were at school. However, fewer students in Serbia continued education beyond compulsory lower-secondary schooling, and among those who did, the majority enrolled in a vocational programme: participation at the upper-secondary level was approximately 88 % in 2022, and VET accounted for nearly three-quarters (72.7 %) of that upper-secondary enrolment. This VET share is considerably higher than the

EU average of 49 % and suggests that access to general education at the upper-secondary level in Serbia may be more restrictive than in other countries, on average.

This could also partly explain why participation in tertiary education in Serbia, at 73.2 % in 2023, still remains below the EU average of 79.7 % (Table 4.1). Although the share of adults with tertiary education qualifications has consistently increased, from 21.5 % in 2022 to 23.4 % in 2024, it remains significantly below the EU average of 30.2 %. There is also an issue with participation in adult learning in Serbia. Limited opportunities and lack of incentives may help explain why only 5.5 % of working-age adults (2024) participate in training activities, which is less than half the EU average of 13.3 %.

Although a tertiary qualification does not necessarily guarantee high-level skills, tertiary attainment — and increasingly also adult learning — are used as a proxy for estimating the availability of highly qualified workers. On this basis, the findings suggest that Serbia may still face constraints in the domestic supply of such workers and remains reliant on qualified migrants to fill skill gaps in the labour market.

The rate of early school leaving in Serbia was around 6 % in 2024, which is lower than the EU average of 9.3 %. Despite this lower drop-out rate in international comparison, a slight increase in the share of early leavers since 2022 suggests that this outcome may be weakening and requires continued attention.

Table 4.1 also points to challenges in ensuring that students in secondary education are functionally literate in key subjects such as reading and mathematics. In mathematics, 43 % of 15-year-olds failed to reach the baseline proficiency level according to the latest OECD PISA assessment (2022). This share is considerably higher than the OECD average (31.1 %). Additionally, more than one-third (35 %) of students attended schools whose principals reported inadequate infrastructure, well above the EU average of 27.9 %.

Table 4.1 also reveals that, despite an improvement since 2023, gaps continue to persist in the availability of recent, internationally comparable data for several key indicators covering participation and access, such as enrolment at lower- and upper-secondary levels, and participation in vocational education. This also includes data on public spending on education. The most recent information shows that in 2022, Serbia allocated 3.2 % of its GDP to the sector, which is significantly below the EU average of 4.7 %.

## Employment and demand for skills

The set of labour-market indicators follows the same question-and-answer logic applied to education and training, but from the perspective of employment. The indicators are organised into two complementary groups. The first group, *Employment and labour-market outcomes* (Table 4.2), addresses how effectively the labour market absorbs people. It consists of the overall employment rate (aged 15+), youth employment rate (aged 15–24), employment rate of recent graduates (aged 20–34, ISCED 3–8), unemployment rate of the overall population (aged 15+), youth unemployment rate (aged 15–24), and the NEET rate (aged 15–29). The second group, *Demand for skills* (Table 4.2), looks at the types of jobs and skills that the economy generates. It consists of employment by broad economic sector (agriculture, industry, services), the incidence of vulnerable employment, and educational mismatch.

**Table 4.2: Headline indicators: employment (Serbia, EU average) (2022–2024)**

Employment and labour market outcomes	2022	2023	2024	EU (1)	Source
Employment rate (% aged 15+ or similar age group)	49.5	50.2	51.4	54.7	LFS
Employment rate (% aged 15–24 or similar age group)	24.2	23.9	24.9	35.0	LFS
Employment rate of recent graduates aged 20–34 (ISCED 3–8)	72.4	72.1	73.1	82.4	LFS
Unemployment rate (% aged 15+ or similar age group)	9.6	9.5	8.6	5.9	LFS
Unemployment rate (% aged 15–24 or similar age group)	24.3	25.0	23.0	14.9	LFS

NEET rate (% aged 15–29 or similar age group)	15.4	15.2	14.9	11.0	LFS
<b>Demand for Skills</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>2024</b>	<b>EU (1)</b>	<b>Source</b>
Employment by broad economic sectors (%): agriculture	13.9	13.1	12.8	3.3	LFS
Employment by broad economic sectors (%): industry	29.7	29.4	29.0	24.1	LFS
Employment by broad economic sectors (%): service	56.4	57.4	58.2	72.1	LFS
Incidence of vulnerable employment (%)	18.8	18.5	18.5	10.0	LFS
Employment by 'educational mismatch': % matched	64.6	64.0	M.D.	M.D.	ILOSTAT

Notes: 1. Data refer to 2019. 2. data refer to 2019, age group 15–59. 3. data refer to 2019, age group 16–24. 4. data refer to 2019, age group 15–24.

Source: ETF KIESE database.

In 2024, just over half (51.4 %) of adults of working age in Serbia were employed (Table 4.2). The employment rate has increased steadily since 2022, narrowing the gap with the EU average (54.7 %) to approximately three percentage points. Although international benchmarks tend to mask important country differences, the comparison suggests that the economy of Serbia is still catching up in terms of its ability to provide sufficient opportunities for formal employment. Youth employment (ages 15–24) improved modestly to 24.9 % in 2024 after a slight dip the year before. However, this metric is also significantly below the EU average (35 %), which suggests that the labour market integration of younger cohorts also remains a challenge.

Overall unemployment among adults decreased to 8.6 % in 2024 — a modest but consistent decline since 2022. Nevertheless, Serbia's unemployment rate still exceeds the EU average (5.9 %). Youth unemployment has been more volatile but trended downwards to 23.0 % in 2024. Although this reduction is encouraging, the rate remains substantially higher than the rate in EU countries on average (14.9 %). The share of young people in the NEET category also continued to decline slightly, to 14.9 % in 2024. This is a positive trend, but the data still shows that about one in seven young people in Serbia remain disconnected from employment and learning.

A relatively high share of recent graduates (ages 20–34) in Serbia are in employment, which is indicative of a smoother transition into the labour market. In 2024, approximately 73 % of recent graduates found work, which is high compared to regional patterns, though still below the EU average of 82.4 %.

Employment by sector in Serbia has been undergoing a gradual but clear structural change during the reference period covered in Table 4.2. Employment in agriculture continued to decline and reached 12.8 % in 2024. Still, agriculture in Serbia continues to account for a share of employment that is nearly four times higher than the EU average (3.3 %). Employment in industry has remained relatively stable at around 29 %, above the EU average (24.1 %). The services sector, meanwhile, expanded to 58.2 %, although this remains significantly smaller than the EU share (72.1 %).

Overall, Serbia is gradually shifting employment away from agriculture and towards sectors that, in many economies, are associated with higher value-added and more diversified economic activity, in particular services. However, job quality continues to be an issue of concern. The prevalence of vulnerable employment persists at around 18.5 %, which is almost double the EU benchmark of 10 %. There are also significant inefficiencies in the alignment between education outputs and labour market demands. As of 2023, roughly one-third of workers in Serbia held positions that did not match their educational qualifications.

## 4.2 System performance indicators

As noted in the introduction to this paper, 'performance' in the context of ETF monitoring describes the extent to which VET systems deliver on their commitments to learners and stakeholders in support of lifelong learning. These commitments typically cover three key areas: ensuring broad and equitable access to education and training opportunities; delivering high-quality and relevant education; and

maintaining an effective and efficient organisation and management of the education system, including adequate resourcing.

To measure performance systematically, the ETF uses System Performance Indices (SPIs), which summarise the extent to which education and training systems fulfil each of their commitments. Each SPI is presented on a scale from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating stronger performance.

Both the headline indicators in Section 4.1 and the SPIs presented in this section are guided by the same core questions: Who takes part? What do they achieve? How do education and training systems support them? The main difference between these two sets of data lies in how these questions are answered. Headline indicators answer the questions with single, stand-alone measures drawn directly from international data sources. The SPIs, on the other hand, are evaluative, composite measures. They are designed explicitly to assess how well VET systems fulfil broader policy commitments that cannot be adequately captured through individual statistics.

## Access and participation

This section presents system performance in VET and adult learning against two specific policy outcomes: support for equitable access and participation for young people and adults, and support for young people in initial VET (IVET) to successfully complete their programmes.

The scope of SPIs tracking access differs according to the target group of learners. For youth, the SPI assesses access specifically to IVET, while for adults it captures access to continuing VET (CVET) and other adult learning opportunities, such as those provided through ALMPs. A separate SPI measures how effectively young learners in IVET are supported in progressing through their programmes and achieving graduation.

In Serbia, upper secondary vocational education lasts about three years following completion of primary schooling. The curricula are nationally standardised across 250 profiles in 15 economic fields, including areas such as mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, health and social care, trade and tourism. In three-year programmes, vocational content dominates, while four-year programmes include a larger share of general education and typically offer progression to tertiary education. Practical training, often including work-based company placements under the dual model, is a key component and involves active cooperation between schools and employers. After graduation, students from four-year programmes commonly have access to higher education, whereas three-year graduates usually enter the labour market directly, though some may access further education through bridging pathways. The IVET framework is designed to align education with labour-market needs, enhance practical competencies and provide clear pathways either into work or to further studies.

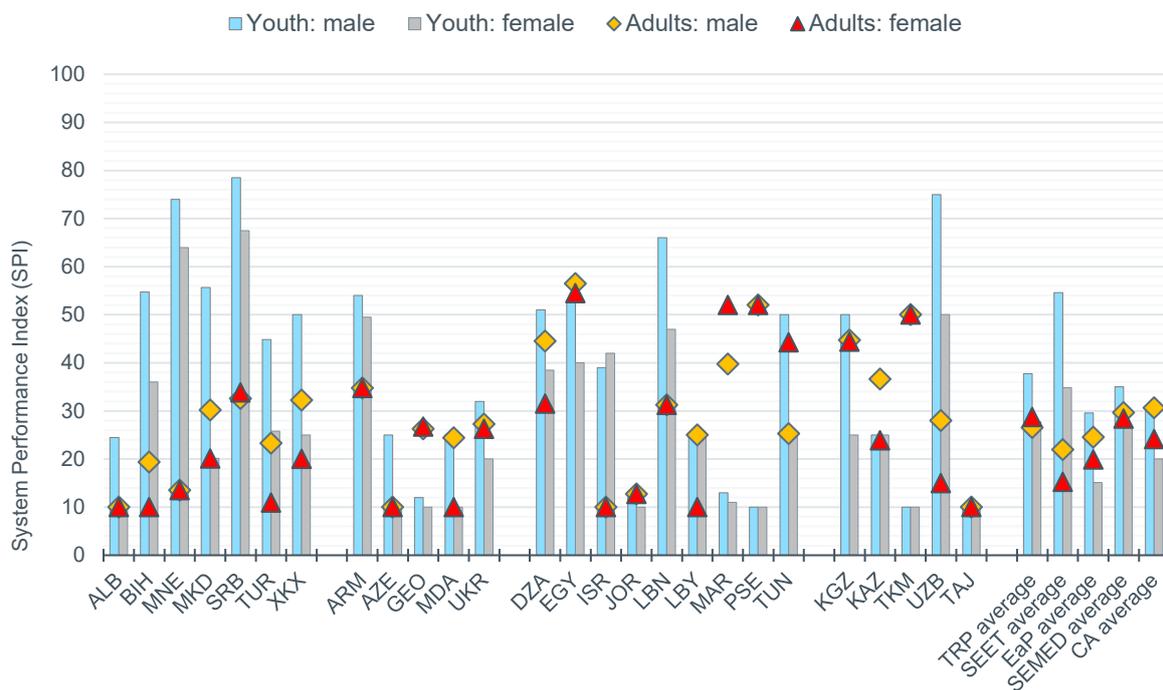
Performance depends on the policies and measures the country is implementing. They provide the opportunities, incentives, and guidance needed to encourage participation and successful completion. The SPI results therefore reflect how effectively these policies deliver on their intended objectives.

## Access by age and gender

Access to vocational education programmes in Serbia is highly favourable for boys (SPI of 79), more so than for boys in other SEET countries on average (SPI of 56) and in the Torino Process monitoring sample on average (SPI of 37) (Figure 4.1). System performance in support of access for girls is somewhat weaker (SPI of 68), but the difference is small and suggests that gender-based barriers in Serbia are relatively minor compared to most other countries in the monitoring sample.

Monitoring and expert survey data confirm that vocational education is a prominent educational pathway. In 2023/2024, 44 282 of 60 087 newly enrolled secondary school students entered vocational schools. Around 74 % of all secondary students attend three- or four-year vocational programmes, nearly two-thirds of them in four-year schools. Dual training is expanding, with enrolments rising from 3 846 in 2020/2021 to 8 956 in 2023/2024. Despite a slight demographic decline, VET remains extensive, covering 15 fields of work, most notably Electrical Engineering, Business, Law and Administration, Engineering and Metalworking, Commerce, Catering and Tourism, and Health and Social Protection.

**Figure 4.1: Access to learning opportunities by country, age and gender of learners — system performance index, ETF partner countries and international average (2025)**



Note: Theoretical index range: min/low performance=0, max/high performance=100<sup>10</sup>.  
 Source: ETF KIESE and Torino Process databases.

Enrolments by gender show parity overall (50 % for girls in 2023/2024), but girls are more strongly represented in high schools (57.8 %) than in vocational schools (46.9 %). Over the past three years, their share among high school students has increased, while their presence in vocational schools has slightly decreased, reinforcing an already established pattern.

Adult education offers various pathways, including formal primary and secondary education, re-skilling, up-skilling, specialisation, and informal learning. In 2024/2025, 5 471 places were approved for adults in primary education and 22 555 for re-skilling, up-skilling, or specialisation programmes — an increase from the previous year. Provision is geographically broad, with schools in all 16 administrations, and training centres in Valjevo, Belgrade, Vršac, and Vlasotince.

Despite this, adult learners remain significantly less likely than youth to participate in training (SPI of 33 for men and 34 for women). These scores are above SEET averages but still in the lower third of the scale. Participation varies, and motivation is often weak, as many adults without formal secondary education pursue shorter, non-formal routes.

Nevertheless, accessibility remains uneven due to systemic barriers. According to the 2022 Adult Education Survey, 19.9 % of adults aged 25–69 participated in education and training, with slightly higher participation among women (21.3 %) than men (18.4 %). Monitoring results also point to a particularly strong demand among women for retraining and qualifications in fields such as health and social protection, trade, tourism, and hospitality.

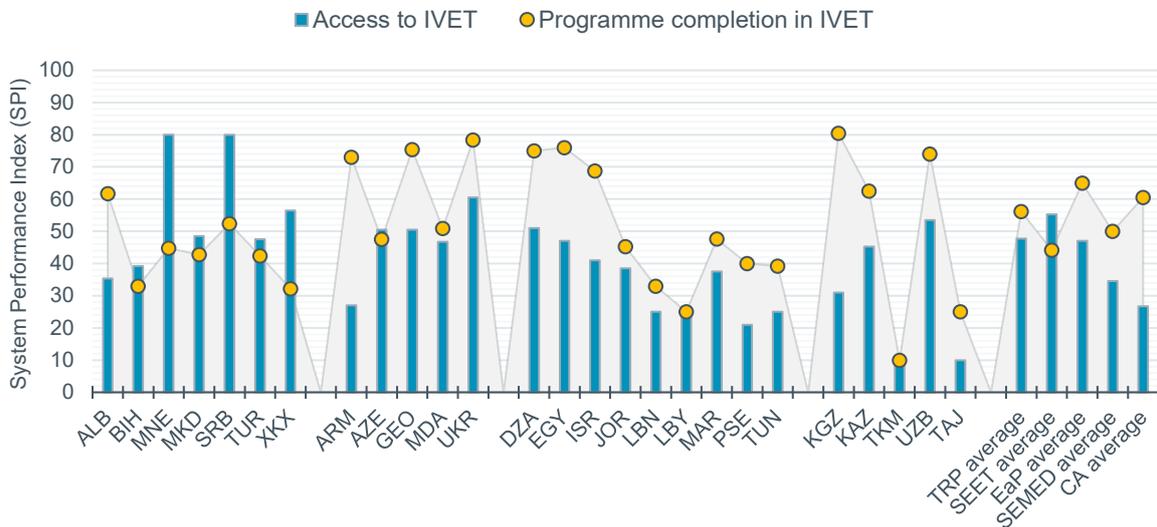
### Retention and programme completion

VET in Serbia is considerably less effective at ensuring that learners complete their studies (SPI of 52) than it is at initially attracting them into vocational education programmes. Other countries in the

<sup>10</sup> The Torino Process makes a distinction between theoretical (full) index range and index range used for reporting purposes. For reporting purposes, rare instances of extreme values on the low end (SPI < 10) and on the high end (SPI > 90) of the index scale are truncated at the upper (10) and lower (90) decile end. This means that the reporting does not discriminate SPI values below 10 and above 90. The international average, on the other hand, is calculated using the full range of the index.

Torino Process sample perform somewhat better at converting VET enrolments into qualifications (SPI of 57, on average), although Serbia still exceeds the regional SEET average (SPI of 48). The gap between strong initial enrolment and moderate retention results indicates that a sizeable share of VET learners in Serbia may be at risk of not completing their programmes on time or at all.

**Figure 4.2: Access and programme completion in IVET — system performance index, ETF partner countries and international average**



Note: Theoretical index range: min/low performance=0, max/high performance=100  
 Source: ETF KIESE and Torino Process databases

This pattern is reflected in official reports and data, which indicate that despite emphasis on equal opportunities and flexible learning pathways — including online instruction, dual learning models, and provisions for learners with special needs — dropout rates remain persistently high. Although the annual dropout rate is relatively low (1.2 % in 2022), the secondary school completion rate, which in 2023 stood at only 86.4 %, indicates that cumulative attrition over several school years is sizeable. This indicates that Serbian secondary education struggles to retain students throughout their studies. Given that almost three quarters of secondary students in Serbia are enrolled in VET, it is reasonable to conclude that a large proportion — indeed, the majority — of dropouts in secondary education come from vocational programmes. Among the reasons for the problem, the expert survey identifies low academic performance, frequent grade repetition, and socioeconomic disadvantage, which plays a significant role, as learners from low-income households often leave school early to seek employment.

Within this broader context, vulnerable learner groups face particularly high risks of dropping out. Among Roma youth, gender disparities in secondary school completion are especially pronounced, with only 49.5 % of Roma girls completing secondary school compared to 69.1 % of Roma boys. Early marriage further exacerbates the issue, as 22.3 % of Roma girls of upper secondary school age are already married. According to a 2022 UNICEF report, almost all married girls (97–100 %) do not attend school (UNICEF, 2022).

### Quality and relevance of learning outcomes

In this section, the SPIs capture the quality of the provision of basic skills and key competences to learners in IVET, as well as the degree to which adults possess foundational skills. These results are complemented by selected KIESE indicators, which track the relevance of learning outcomes by examining employment rates of individuals aged 15 and older, disaggregated by educational attainment in ETF partner countries.

The ETF monitoring focuses on keeping quality and relevance separate because, although they often reinforce each other, they do not always coincide. Learners with solid foundational skills may still struggle to find suitable employment, while individuals might secure jobs without having acquired a

comprehensive skillset. By tracking these aspects separately, the reporting hopes to identify both the intrinsic benefits of education and how effectively it aligns with the needs of the labour market.

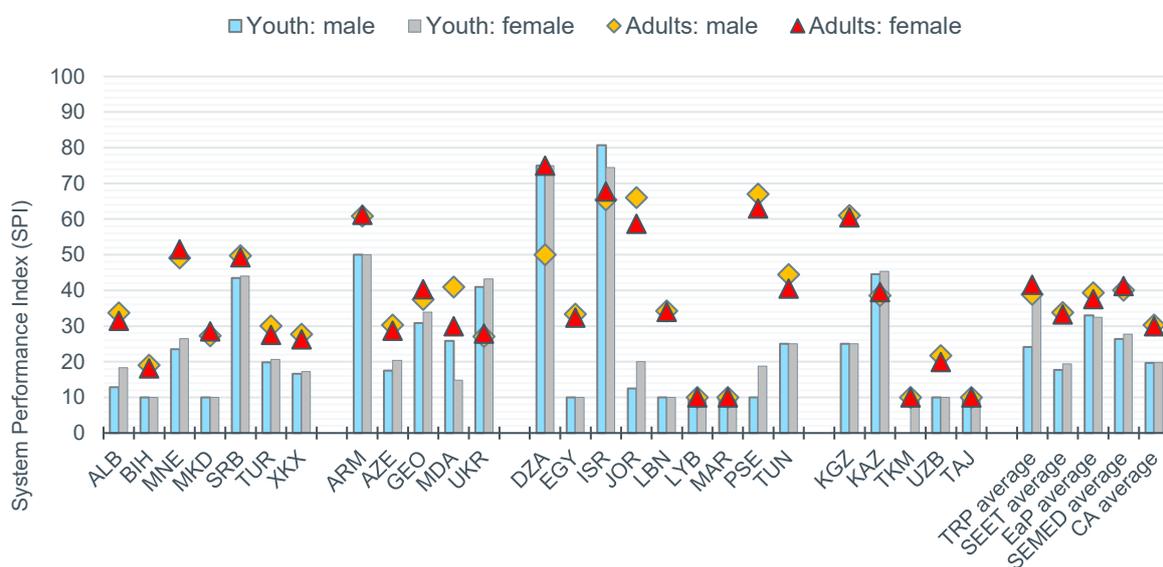
### Quality of learning by age and gender

In a broader regional and international context characterised by weak outcomes, VET in Serbia performs above average in delivering foundational skills and competences to young learners. The SPI score in this domain is 44 for both males and females, compared to Torino Process averages of 26 and 27, and regional averages of 20 and 22.

This aggregate result masks wide disparities between school types. According to the OECD PISA 2022 survey, students in three-year vocational schools score far lower than their peers in general high schools, with gaps of up to 159, 182, and 174 points in science, reading, and mathematics. These gaps translate into much higher rates of functional illiteracy: 16 % of high school students lack basic skills in mathematics and 11 % in reading, compared to 38–72 % and 2–67 % in four-year vocational schools. In three-year vocational schools, 79–95 % of students fail to reach functional literacy in both mathematics and reading. Possible explanations cited in the monitoring survey include weak basic knowledge from primary education, low motivation for languages and mathematics, and teaching methods not tailored to vocational learners.

These differences also intersect with gender-specific inequalities. At upper-secondary level, 68.2 % of girls in Serbia are enrolled in vocational programmes, compared with an EU average of 42 %. The PISA 2022 survey shows girls outperforming boys by 25 points in reading but scoring 11 points lower in mathematics. Since vocational tracks with high female enrolment — such as business, agriculture, and medical studies — produce weaker literacy and numeracy outcomes than general education, many female students may face additional barriers when moving on to higher education or employment.

**Figure 4.3: Quality of skills and competences by country, age and gender of learners — system performance index, ETF partner countries and international average (2025)**



Note: Theoretical index range: min/low performance=0, max/high performance=100.

Source: ETF KIESE and Torino Process databases.

Adults in Serbia also perform above average internationally. The SPI in this domain is 50 for both men and women, compared to Torino Process sample averages of 39 for men and 42 for women, and SEET regional averages of 38 for men and 37 for women. Yet a mismatch persists between adult skills and labour market needs. Of unemployed adults registered with the NES, 35.6 % have no or only low education, while 51 % hold secondary or post-secondary qualifications without a university

degree. According to ILO estimates, 10.1 % of all employees, and 11.3 % of employed adults, are undereducated for their jobs.

Policy responses are set out in the Employment Strategy 2021–2026, which prioritises adults with inadequate qualifications for active labour market measures. Still, adult participation in education and training is stable at around 19.9 %, with little change since 2016. Women participate more often in primary-level adult education (14.7 % versus 9.2 % of men), reflecting measures targeting socio-economically vulnerable groups. Men, by contrast, have higher participation at secondary level (61.8 % compared to 50.8 %), consistent with the aim of training adults in skills in demand. Unemployed women remain underrepresented in informal training, with a participation rate of just 9 %.

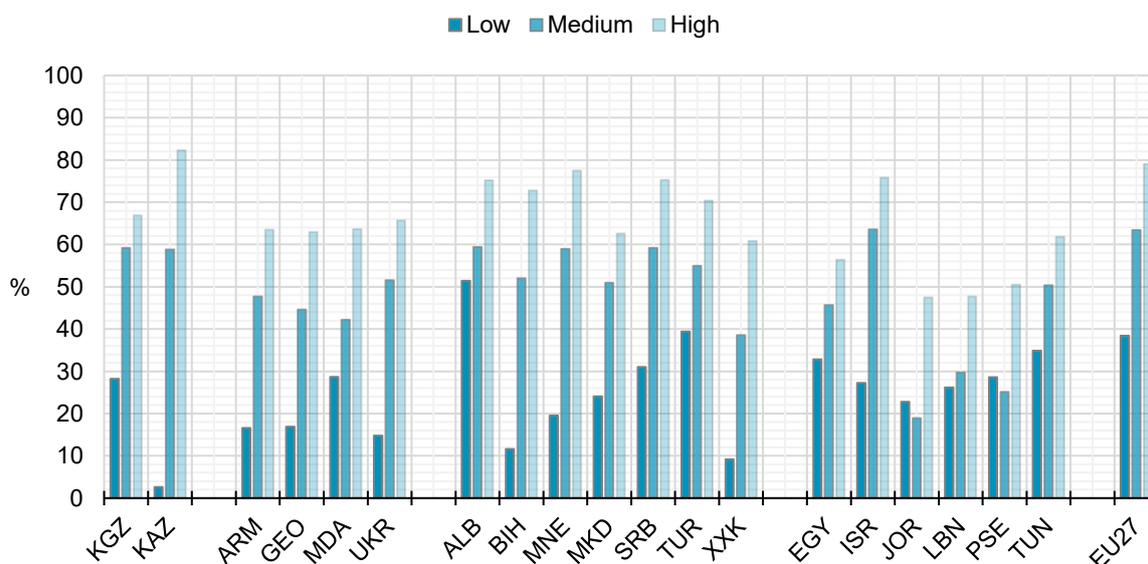
Survey evidence suggests that adult education yields positive outcomes: 44.2 % of participants found employment after completing short courses, and 30.6 % secured jobs directly related to the training received. Although detailed outcome data are not published on the Ministry of Education’s Open Data Portal, the information available indicates that adult training programmes partly address skills mismatches in the labour market.

### Relevance and labour market outcomes

This section uses employment data to gauge how effectively education in Serbia meets labour market needs. Specifically, it compares employment rates by educational attainment among adults with EU-27 averages.

In Serbia, higher levels of education clearly improve employment prospects, though employment rates remain below EU-27 averages at all attainment levels (Figure 4.4). Within Serbia, the sharpest difference is between adults with low and medium qualifications: 59.2 % of those with medium-level education are employed, compared to 31.0 % of those with low education. Among adults with higher education, the employment rate is 75.3 %. When compared to the EU-27, employment rates in Serbia trail the average by 7.4 points for low-qualified adults, 4.2 points for medium-qualified adults, and 3.8 points for highly educated adults. The relatively high rates among the highly educated likely reflect graduates’ willingness to accept jobs outside their specialisation or below their qualification level, which can displace lower-qualified workers.

**Figure 4.4: Employment rate (age 15+) by educational attainment, ETF partner countries (2024)**



Source: ETF KIESE database.

Findings from employer surveys confirm these difficulties. According to the Annual Survey of Employers’ Needs (NES and Chamber of Commerce, cited in the Torino Process survey), the main hiring problems are a lack of occupations in demand (27.4 %), inadequate knowledge and skills

(25.7 %), and insufficient experience (25.2 %). The ILO further estimates that 10.1 % of Serbian employees are undereducated, lacking skills needed for their roles.

The mismatch between education and labour market needs is also evident in occupations. Media reports cited in the Torino Process monitoring survey note that employability among technicians trained in four-year VET programmes in agriculture, biotechnology, tourism, hospitality, textiles, and administration is weak. In contrast, cleaners, geriatric nurses, janitors, and waiters are in high demand, yet their skills are mostly gained through practical work rather than schooling.

## System management and organisation

In the final section on policy and system performance, the focus shifts to the organisation and management of the education and training system, with particular attention to VET.

The analysis presents data on system performance in the form of SPIs in three areas: effective allocation and use of financial resources in VET; allocation, use, and professional capacity of human resources, including leadership skills and professional competence of school management and staff; and system steering and management, which includes data, quality assurance, school leadership, and the internationalisation of VET.

## Financial resources in VET and lifelong learning

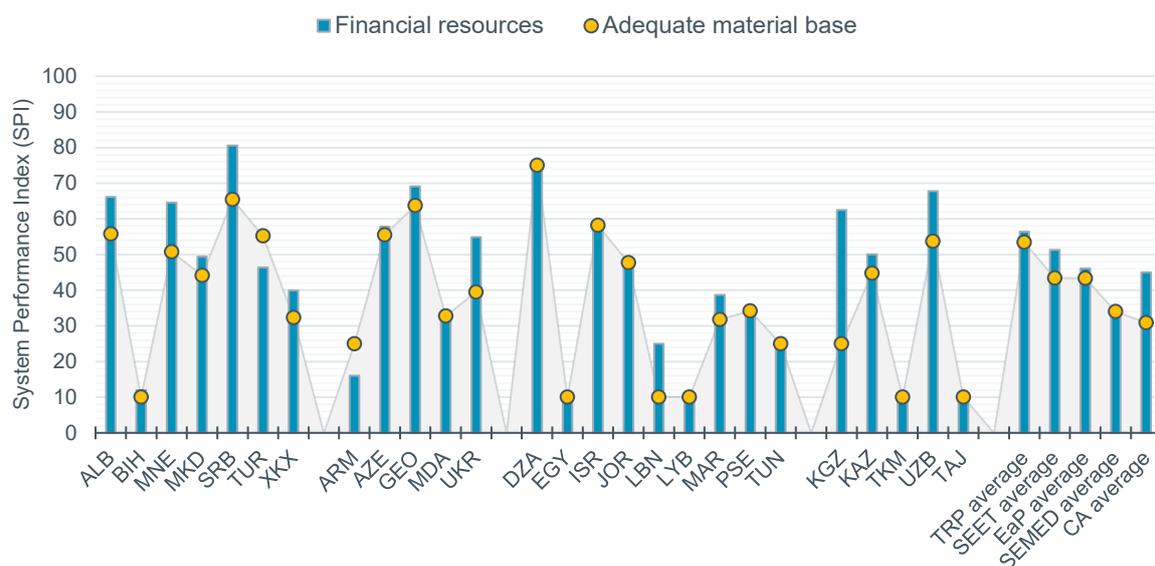
This section considers how effectively Serbia ensures adequate financial resources for its VET system, and how successfully it converts these resources into suitable infrastructure and learning materials.

The data in Figure 4.5 suggests that the VET system of Serbia has access to comparatively high levels of funding and converts these funds into suitable material conditions for teaching and learning. With an SPI of 81, system performance in securing financial resources is considerably stronger than the SEET average (SPI of 51) and the Torino Process monitoring sample (SPI of 56). The capacity to provide adequate facilities and equipment for teaching (SPI of 61) and instructional materials is also above both the SEET regional average (SPI of 43) and the Torino Process average (SPI of 53), though at a somewhat lower level than funding itself.

Eurostat data, quoted in the monitoring survey, confirms the scale of commitment, with EUR 354.6 million spent on upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary vocational education in 2022. Allocations reflect policy priorities such as ensuring access: initial vocational education and certain adult education programmes in public institutions are free of charge, while fees apply in private institutions. Targeted interventions, including active labour market policies that enable unemployed persons registered with the National Employment Service to access training, are another driver of expenditure.

In the 2025 budget, the Ministry of Education earmarked RSD 68.7 billion for secondary and adult education, including infrastructure modernisation, enrolment processes, and support for vocational schools with dormitories. Additional resources fund projects to optimise the school network and improve adult education, as well as grants to non-governmental and international organisations.

**Figure 4.5: Allocation and use of financial resources in education and training — index of system performance, ETF partner countries and international average (2024)**



Note: Theoretical index range: min/low performance=0, max/high performance=100.

Source: ETF KIESE and Torino Process databases.

Despite these favourable indicators, two considerations remain. First, good material conditions do not necessarily mean that all VET needs are met, as competing priorities within the sector may still require resources. The lack of budget disaggregation for vocational and adult education further complicates the assessment of whether funding fully aligns with VET needs. Second, although an SPI of 66 for the adequacy of the material base is above average internationally, it remains well below the funding score (81). This suggests that there is scope for improving how financial resources are converted into tangible inputs for teaching and learning.

### Human resources: allocation, use, professional capacity

Policy and system performance in support of human resources in VET in Serbia is rated with an SPI of 80, which is considerably above the regional average (SPI of 59) and the Torino Process average (SPI of 61). According to the Torino Process monitoring survey, Serbia has placed an emphasis in recent years on strengthening the continuous professional development (CPD) of teachers and school staff by developing a new concept for its CPD system, improving accreditation procedures, mechanisms, criteria, and assessment tools, and expanding access to professional training opportunities. National institutions, such as the Institute for the Advancement of Education and Upbringing (ZUOV) and the Pedagogical Institute of Vojvodina, have developed digital platforms and accreditation systems to facilitate CPD and ensure that the professional development standards remain consistent across educational institutions.

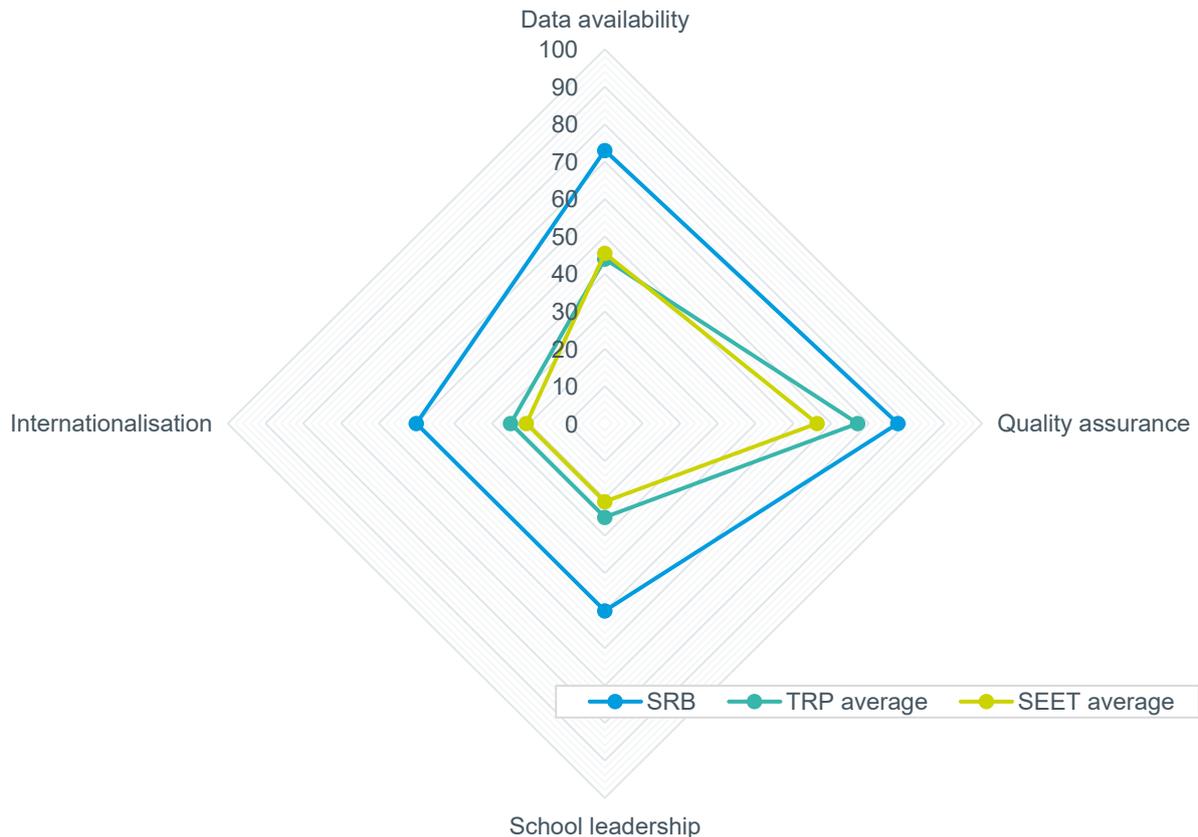
Despite generally favourable conditions for staff professionalisation, implementation on the ground remains somewhat uneven. Schools with greater financial or institutional resources are typically better positioned to benefit from national initiatives, which leads to disparities between schools regarding their capacity to ensure CPD for staff.

Additionally, recent international assessments, such as the OECD's PISA, have shown that there are ongoing issues related to teacher shortages and uneven teacher qualifications. Despite robust national frameworks, challenges in staffing quality and adequacy persist and signal that there is a gap between policy objectives and practical outcomes in this domain of ETF monitoring.

## System steering and management

The availability of data on VET in Serbia is relatively good, although there is still room for improvement. In 2025, some 73 % of the internationally comparable indicators used for the ETF monitoring of system performance were available, a similar percentage as in 2024 (Figure 4.6).

**Figure 4.6: System steering and management — index of system performance, selected dimensions, ETF partner countries and Torino Process average (2024)**



Note: Theoretical index range: min/low performance=0, max/high performance=100.  
Source: ETF KIESE and Torino Process databases.

According to the monitoring questionnaire, most of the data used for policymaking and monitoring at national level come from sources such as the Qualifications Agency, the ENIC/NARIC centre, the NOKS Portal, the Unified Education Information System, the Statistical Office, and the National Employment Service. Serbia also actively uses international classifications and tools, including ISCED 2013-F, EUROPASS, ESCO, ISCO-08, CEDEFOP data, and the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFRL). The country has also set up an Education Management Information System (EMIS) which, however, is less effective as a source of information as it struggles with delays in data entry from schools.

Serbia shows good results in terms of quality assurance in VET (SPI of 78, considerably higher than the SEET average of 56). A distinct feature of its quality assurance arrangements is that they involve multiple institutions and layers of responsibility. The National Qualifications Agency, for instance, promotes the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQAVET) by setting standards for qualifications and proposing quality improvements. There is also the Institute for Educational Quality Evaluation (IEQE), the Institute for the Advancement of Education and Upbringing (ZUOV), and the Ministry of Education which formally approves curricula and final examination programmes. In addition, the National Education Council oversees standards for student assessments and tests.

Despite these comprehensive arrangements, the outcomes and findings from quality assurance activities are not always publicly available or easy to access, which may hamper their usefulness for certain groups of education stakeholders.

Serbia has also prioritised quality assurance in adult education by introducing new regulations in 2024 that foresee internal and external evaluations of providers, work on the recognition of prior learning, and additional training for adult education staff.

At the provider level, school leaders in VET are selected through a structured process involving school boards and Teachers' Councils, with final appointments made by the Minister of Education based on the school board's recommendation. In practice, however, compliance with these requirements varies — a finding also reflected in Serbia's mid-range SPI score of 50 for this area of monitoring (Figure 4.6). For instance, in some cases principals remain in their roles despite failing to pass the required licensing exam within the legal period. In fact, the monitoring questionnaire notes that many school principals in Serbia lack adequate training to perform effectively as instructional leaders. In addition, heavy dependence on external financial support puts the appointments of principals at risk of undue influence.

Internationalisation activities in Serbian VET have increased in recent years, mainly through Erasmus+ participation. The number of approved mobility projects for vocational education rose from 30 in 2022 to 37 in 2023, driven by funding that surpassed EUR 1.2 million over the past few years. Since 2020, Erasmus+ accreditations have allowed vocational schools to more easily access funding and plan international activities strategically.

The Tempus Foundation and the National Team for Supporting Mobility Projects facilitate participation through training and mentoring. According to the monitoring questionnaire, despite increases, internationalisation opportunities mostly benefit IVET providers, while CVET providers are largely left out.

# ABBREVIATIONS

ALMM	Active labour market measure
AI	Artificial Intelligence
APZ	Abbreviation of the annual report on employment in Serbian language
CEB	Council of Europe Development Bank
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CEFRL	Common European Framework for Languages
CIPS	Information and Professional Guidance Services
CLASSNQFS	Classification of Qualifications System in the NQFS
COVEs	Centres of Vocational Excellence
CPD	Continuous professional development
CVET	Continuous vocational education and training
DESA	UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs
E2E	Education to Employment
EACEA	European Education and Culture Executive Agency
EAFA	European Alliance for Apprenticeships
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EC	European Commission
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EIB	European Investment Bank
EMIS	Education management information system
ENE	ETF's Network for Excellence
ENIC/NARIC	Qualifications recognition system
ENQA	European Qualifications Framework
EPALE	European platform for adult learning
EQAVET	European Framework for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ERI SEE	Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe
ERP	Economic Reform Programme

ESCO	European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations
ESJS	European Skills and Jobs Survey
ETF	European Training Foundation
ETFP	Technical Education and Vocational Training ( <i>Enseignement Technique et Formation Professionnelle</i> )
EU	European Union
EUR	Currency indicator <i>Euro</i>
EURES	European Employment Services
EURYDICE	Education Information Network in Europe
FSA	Financial Social Assistance scheme
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIZ	<i>Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH</i> – German Cooperation
GNI	Gross National Income
GVA	Gross value added
HDI	Human Development Index
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IEQE	Institute for Educational Quality Evaluation
IIE	Institute for the Improvement of Education
IJRJET	International Journal for Research in Vocational Education and Training
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
ISCO	International Standard Classification of Occupations
ISIC	International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities
IT	Information Technology
IVET	Initial Vocational Education and Training
JISP	Unified Information System in Education
KIESE	Key Indicators on Education, Skills and Employment
LFS	Labour Force Survey
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
MLEVSA	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs

MoE	Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development
NARIC	National Academic Recognition Information Centre
NEET	Not in employment, education or training
NES	National Employment Service
NQFS	National Qualifications Framework of Serbia
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
QS	Qualification standards
RCF	Regional Challenge Fund
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RS	Republic of Serbia
RSD	Serbian dinar
SEDS	Strategy for Education Development in Serbia
SEET	South Eastern Europe and Türkiye
SELFIE	Self-reflection on Effective Learning by Fostering the use of Innovative Educational technologies
SILC	Statistics on Income and Living Conditions
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
SPIs	System performance indices
SORS	Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia
SQA	Serbian Qualifications Agency
SRB	Country code for <i>Serbia</i>
SSCs	Sector Skills Councils
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TRP	Torino Process
UEN	Unique Educational Number
UIS	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNICEF	United Nations Children's Emergency Fund
US	United States
USD	United States Dollar
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VET-OD	Osnabrück Declaration on VET
VNFIL	Validation of non-formal and informal learning
WB	World Bank
WBF	Western Balkans Fund
WBL	Work-Based Learning
WIIW	Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies
YG	Youth Guarantee
ZUOV	Institute for the Advancement of Education and Upbringing

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