



Montenegro
Ministry of Education

***Consultation Process and Preparation for the
United Nations Transforming Education Summit –
Final Report***

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Abbreviations

AAC – Augmentative and assistive communication

AT – Assistive technology

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

GDP – Gross domestic product

Covid-19 – Disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus

ECDI¹Index – Early Childhood Development Index

EU-SILC – European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions

ExC – Examination Centre

ICT – Information and Communications Technology

IDEP – Individual Development Education Program

ISCED – International Standard Classification of Education

ITP – Individual Transition Plan

PPI– Public preschool institutions

PIPS – Public institution primary school

PISS – Public institution secondary school

LGBTQ – Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer persons

MEIS – Montenegrin Education Information System

MICS – Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey

MONSTAT – Statistical Office of Montenegro

MoE – Ministry of Education

MLSW – Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare

MoH – Ministry of Health

¹ECDI Index (Early Childhood Development Index) reports on a scale of 0-100 and indicates the percentage of children aged 3-4 years who are at the appropriate level of development for a given age.

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NSDS 2030 – National Sustainable Development Strategy to 2030

NGO – Non-governmental organization

PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment (15-year-olds)

SEN – Special educational needs

ReLoad – Regional Programme on Local Democracy in the Western Balkans

SELFIE – Self-reflection on Effective Learning by Fostering the use of Innovative Educational technologies

SDG4 – Sustainable Development Goal 4

STEM – Interdisciplinary approach to learning through four disciplines: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

TES – Transforming Education Summit

TIMSS – Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

UN – United Nations System

UNDP – United Nations Development Programme

UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNSTAT – United Nations Statistics Division

APM – Association of Psychologists of Montenegro

VNR – Voluntary national review for sustainable development

OTTA – Office of Textbooks and Teaching Aids

EdO – Education Office

Summary of key recommendations for transforming education

With a view to defining the key actions for transforming education, and as preparation for the UN Summit on this topic, the Ministry of Education has conducted a national consultation process with the support of the United Nations System in Montenegro and the Association of Psychologists of Montenegro (APM). The consultation process included consultations with teachers and students, validation with parents, as well as a desk analysis of existing documents in the thematic area. The field research was conducted through 43 focus groups in 20 schools (13 primary and 7 secondary schools), with 265 students (110 boys and 155 girls) and 200 teachers (26 male and 174 female).

The Covid-19 crisis and subsequent school closures have worsened long-standing systemic weaknesses affecting the education system in Montenegro, including limited access, quality, equity, inadequate infrastructure and financing. The crisis has also opened up some new issues, such as the almost complete lack of quality digital materials and insufficient digital skills to effectively overcome school closures. The pandemic has led to a loss of learning and motivation, has resulted in loneliness and mental health problems. Vulnerable groups children have suffered the most in terms of risk of developmental loss and exclusion.

Regarding SDG 4, preschool enrollment has increased to 72%, which is an increase of 20% over the last five years. Household expenses for education were reduced with the introduction of free textbooks in primary education. Significant progress in inclusive education is evident, but serious quality issues remain, as evidenced by the PISA results, which require further efforts and investment.

In the opinion of all the respondents, the key areas of development for transforming education in a way that will enable all children and young people, including the most vulnerable, to develop and advance to their full potential, are the following:

- It is necessary to develop a complete, comprehensive and multi-year education strategy, with clearly defined goals and ways to address the learning crisis and to improve the quality, access, inclusiveness, relevance and resilience of education. Also, based on this strategy, action plans should be developed for each educational level, with a focus on the importance of early development, preparation for future schooling/education and lifelong learning skills; the importance of education needs to be continuously highlighted, especially through the coordinated response of institutions and strong support of the government.

- The curriculum should be revised to respond to the needs of the 21st century, to focus on key competencies such as reading, STEM, digital literacy, social and emotional skills. The curriculum should be relevant, flexible, interactive and inclusive, while enabling transition and integration; curriculum implementation needs to be continuously monitored and evaluated and revisions based on evidence to ensure quality.
- It is necessary to increase investment in the school infrastructure, in accessibility (architectural and IT) and in equipment, in order to address the main challenges in these areas and to promote a stimulating and safe school environment (learning, digital, non-violent); school management needs to be more pro-active in this area, especially in vocational schools.
- Training programmes for future and current teachers need to be revised and made more effective; they should be aligned to meet the needs of teachers and educational reforms. Teacher autonomy should be encouraged and used to create learning situations for all students that are both motivating and inspiring;
- There is a need for meaningful interaction between students, teachers and parents. Clear links between the curriculum and real life are essential as is a well thought out and planned link with the labor market. In order to create holistic support for children, it is necessary to increase the engagement of education experts, psychologists and pedagogues.
- A strong and individualized focus should be placed on the empowerment of girls, boys and adolescents from vulnerable groups such as: children with disabilities, Roma and Egyptian children, children affected by poverty, children without parental care, those living in remote areas or those exposed to any type of unfavorable conditions. Schools should be a safe for all children, especially the most vulnerable; it should provide them with the care and support they need to overcome the numerous and multiple obstacles they face.
- Pursuant to the Education Digitalization Strategy (2022–2025), further efforts should be invested in the smart integration of digital tools and technologies in education and in harnessing their potential. This should be achieved through a balanced combination of live and online education to improve the quality of the education system, the relevance of inclusiveness and resilience.

Last, but not least, in order to ensure a quality and equitable transformation of education, including the smart and inclusive use of digital technologies, **public investment in education must be increased**. It must also be more effective and efficient. Current allocations from the state budget (2021) for the education sector in Montenegro are relatively low compared to other

countries and currently amount to 7.3% of GDP; further efforts are needed to ensure that increased and sustainable financing is secured to carry out long-term educational reforms.

Background information on the Montenegrin education system and on the methodology of the consultation process

Recognizing that education is a human right and also the basis for peace and sustainable development, the UN Secretary General convened the Transforming Education Summit (TES) for September 2022. The Summit is being convened within the context of two challenges encountered on the path of ensuring quality education and lifelong learning for all. Firstly, the world is experiencing a global learning crisis; the quality and dynamics of this are being felt to varying degrees across the world and it is putting hundreds of millions of children and young people in a situation of exclusion. It is also depriving many of the right to quality education. Secondly, this same crisis is part of a broader challenge; it relates to the ability of traditional education systems to provide the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and competencies needed in today's world, especially after Covid-19, which has further deepened inequalities in education. The Summit seeks to renew global commitment to education, to acknowledge education as the most important element of public life and to ensure that it gains the widest possible participation through consultations.

With the support of the United Nations System in Montenegro and the Association of Psychologists of Montenegro (APM) as its implementation partner, the Ministry of Education conducted a national consultation process with a view to defining the key actions for transforming education in preparation for the aforementioned UN Summit. The consultation process included consultations with teachers and students, as well as a desk analysis of existing documents in the thematic area. It was implemented in May, June and July 2022.

The goal was to get a view of the current situation, needs, experiences, attitudes, ideas and recommendations for transforming the education system and to make the findings visible to the general, political and global public, as well as to the community gathered through the UN System.

The process included the analysis of existing documents that had previously sparked discussions on these and other similar topics. It also involved conducting consultations directly with teachers, students and parents.

The principles that guided the process were:

- Development-age group
- Participation
- Regionality
- Visibility
- Equality of opportunity
- Inclusivity
- Multiculturalism

Methodology

Montenegro is located in Southeast Europe. It has an area of 13,812 km² and a coastline that is 293 km long. The country regained its independence on 3 June 2006, after a referendum that took place on 21 May 2006. The Constitution defines the country as an independent and sovereign state with a republican form of government. Montenegro is a civil, democratic, ecological and social justice state based on the rule of law. The capital city is Podgorica, and the old royal capital is Cetinje. The currency is the euro. Legislative power is exercised by the parliament, while the executive power is performed by the government. Judicial power is held by the court. The official language is Montenegrin, with Cyrillic and Latin scripts having an equal status. Serbian, Bosnian, Albanian and Croatian are also in official use. Montenegro is currently in the process of European integration and has been a NATO member since 2017. At the moment, Montenegro has an estimated 621,306 inhabitants (2020)², of which 138,048 are students in the education system (72,132 boys and 65,916 girls)³.

The education system in Montenegro consists of: preschool, primary, general secondary education (gymnasiums), vocational education, higher education and adult education (Tables 1 and 2). Preschool education includes children up to the age of six (until they start primary school). Preschool institutions can be state-owned (public) or private. Primary education is mandatory and free of charge. The educational programmes of the nine-year primary school are implemented within three cycles (3+3+3). General secondary education in Montenegro lasts for four years. Gymnasiums apply a curriculum that has three components: compulsory subjects, compulsory

²<https://data.gov.me/dataset/procjenjeni-broj-stanovnika-po-opstinama-sredinom-godine>

³ Source: MEIS (Montenegrin Education Information System)

elective subjects, compulsory elective content. Vocational education can be implemented as: lower vocational education (duration of two years); secondary vocational education (duration of three or four years); higher vocational education (duration of up to two years, as a continuation of secondary vocational education).

Table 1: Public education institutions

Public education institutions ⁴	Total
21 public preschool institutions ⁵	481
162 public central primary schools ⁶ and 229 public branch primary schools	
50 public secondary schools ⁷ and 1 public-private secondary school ⁸	
13 public institution music schools ⁹	
2 public institution education centers ¹⁰	
3 public institution resource centers	

Table 2: Overview of the number of children/students and staff in the education system

	Children/students ¹¹			Staff ¹²		
	M	F	Total	Management ¹³	Teachers	Professional associates ¹⁴
Preschool education ¹⁵	12,022	10,986	23,008	48	1,314	47
Primary school education	35,937	33,057	68,994	212	4,645	168
Secondary general and vocational education ¹⁶	12,808	12,420	25,228	83	2,532	47

⁴ www.skolskamreza.edu.me and <https://www.skolskastatistika.edu.me>

⁵ Two within education centers (Plužine and Šavnik) and within a primary school (Andrijevića).

⁶ Two within education centers.

⁷ Eleven gymnasiums, ten mixed secondary schools. The rest are vocational schools.

⁸ Two public schools within education centers.

⁹ Four are also secondary schools at the same time.

¹⁰ Education centers encompass a kindergarten, primary and secondary school (Plužine and Šavnik).

¹¹ Including education centers.

¹² Excluding education centers – teachers – 216, management– 9, associates– 5.

¹³ The school principal, deputies, etc.

¹⁴ Pedagogue, psychologist, speech therapist.

¹⁵ Private and public.

¹⁶ Private and public.

This research is qualitative and is based on descriptive data whose primary task is to explain the meaning of, or to interpret factual information. It is qualitative because it offers analyses whilst mapping policies and practices to define any transformations. It sheds light on practices, needs and competencies, and provides a critical overview, conclusions and challenges for the relevant educational sector. The analysis is descriptive and provides an overview of policies, experiences and needs.

The contribution is scientific because it examines and points to the processes and changes that have occurred after sudden significant historical events, proving their impact. It is practical because it shows ways to change the paradigm in order to allow the system to respond more successfully to its needs and challenges. Social contribution is reflected in the fact that it indicates the current situation and experiences, offering ideas for transformation that could bring individual and general social gain.

The UN Guidelines for National Consultations were used as a methodological framework and include the answers to questions within the following thematic areas:

1. Recovery from educational disruption due to Covid-19 and the measures to be taken to ensure a full recovery from its impact on the education system;
2. Transforming education: identifying the main innovative approaches as levers for transforming educational policies and practices in the mid-term and long-term period;
3. Overview of national educational goals and benchmarks: what reforms are necessary to achieve, at a higher level, the ambitions needed to recover from the Covid-19 crisis? What is necessary to start accelerating towards meeting the requirements of SDG4?
4. Ensuring sustainable public financing: what measures can be taken to ensure that the public financing of education is both adequate and sustainable?

A desk or document analysis implies collecting secondary data from previous research, analyses, MEIS. Below are the documents that correspond to the target topic, either directly or indirectly (their segments cover important educational areas and/or their influence on them):

- Analysis of the education sector 2015-2020;
- Analysis of research results among psychologists – assessment of Covid-19 impact and needs;
- The Second Voluntary National Review: Montenegro and Sustainable Development Goals 2016-2021;

- Research and assessment of local policies related to youth and their perceptions/needs in 15 local self-governments;
- 'Effects of Covid-19 on vulnerable groups' - research report;
- 'The impact of measures to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus on the health, behavior and mental health of children and young people in Montenegro' - research report;
- Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – report;
- Key competencies – Handbook for primary and secondary school teachers (ISCED levels 1, 2 and 3) with guidelines for formative appraisal;
- Roadmap for reforms – System of social benefits and social and child protection services;
- Equity in education in the PISA mirror – part of the document Report on PISA Results 2018;
- A summary of previously conducted direct and online consultations on education in Montenegro;
- A summary of consultations with young people via the U-report platform;
- Optional – 'My Life' - video.

The research procedure (Table 3) was carried out by members of the APM after the initial counseling/training session. The instruments used were focus groups, based on development and age. Four guides were designed: for teachers, for primary school students, for secondary school students and for parents. These guides related to the impact of Covid-19 on education in the following areas: ideas for recovery; identification of the main strategic ideas; educational goals and benchmarks in relation to inclusive, fair, safe and healthy schools; curriculum– quality, learning and skills for life and work, both to be taught to students and also in terms of training for the teaching profession; innovation; digital learning and transformation; educational financing. The so-called collaborative approach was implemented with the help and support of parents, with the aim of verifying and supplementing findings previously obtained through parent focus groups. A final meeting was held with stakeholders (public and civil sectors) and decision-makers with a view to agreeing on a vision to transform education in the future.

Table3: Overview of goals, tasks and procedures

Goal: To obtain a view of the current situation, attitudes, ideas and recommendations to enable the transformation of the education system; also, to make findings visible to the general, political and global public, as well as to the community gathered through the UN System.	
Task	Procedure
Examine existing research, analyses.	Desk analysis
Examine the views, attitudes, ideas and recommendations of primary and secondary school teachers.	Focus group with teachers
Examine the views, attitudes, ideas and recommendations of primary and secondary school students.	Focus group with students
Verify, supplement and align obtained findings; draft final conclusions and recommendations	Collaborative focus group with parents; final meeting through national consultations
Formulate the findings in the consultation report and define a national statement	Qualitative analysis: Atlas Program; SPSS – statistical inference; focus group with parents

Following data collection, we used descriptive statistics. The Atlas Program was used for qualitative data analysis. Also, we used the SPSS program for statistical inference, quantitative data processing – ranking.

Ethics

In the consultation process, the circumstances of Covid-19 and territorial coverage and representation were considered. The teaching process and the school calendar were observed, developmental characteristics and children’s rights were considered. Additionally, educational levels, regional, linguistic and national diversity, individual approach and differentiation and inclusion were all considered. Precautions were taken to ensure confidentiality for all of the participants, who had the option to withdraw at any time if they felt the need to do so, or if any kind of discomfort arose. No harm to any of the participants was recorded. There was no form of payment or participation fee in this research.

Population and sampling

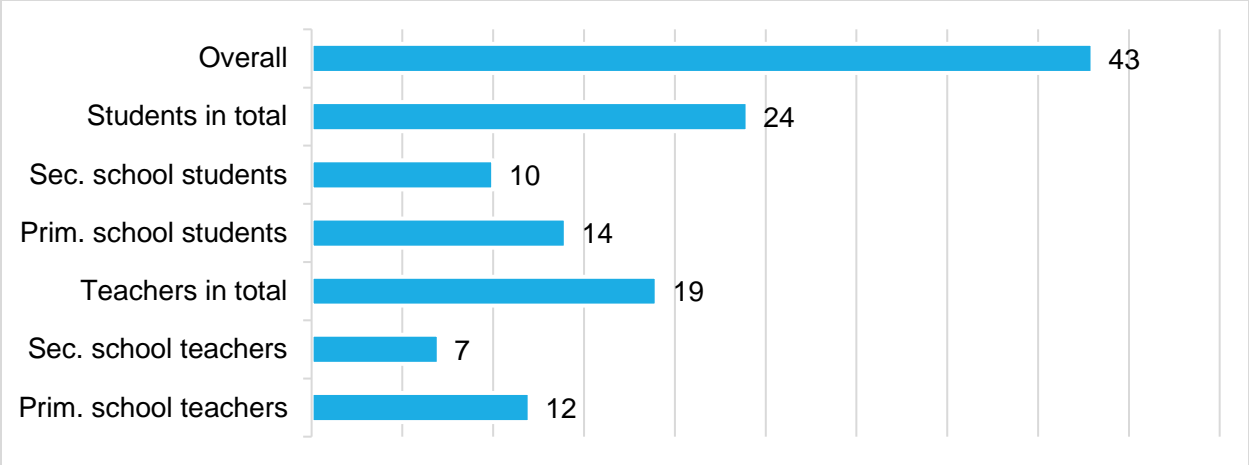
The population was indirect and direct.

The desk analysis was underpinned by significant documents that already existed, whose experiences and findings were considered valuable for this process and included valuable population coverage. Expressed in figures, the process included: VNR consultations through

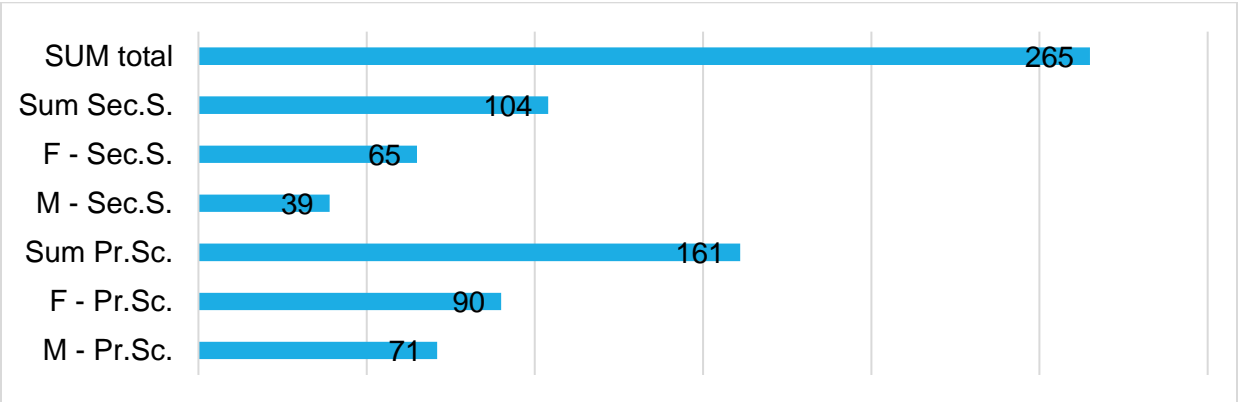
three regional meetings in 17 municipalities, 80 participants, the Protector of Human Rights and his Golden Advisers (age 14-17 from all regions of Montenegro, of different ethnic origins, with developmental disabilities) – 9 respondents; U-Report: education – 356 respondents, violence – 433 young people; Internet platform for SDG – 574 respondents, 2,200 questionnaires; analysis of the education sector, consultations: MoE: 24, Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare: 2, Education Office: 6, Examination Center: 4, Office of Textbooks and Teaching Aids: 1, Monstat: 1, UCG: 5, Parliament: 2, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: 2, NGOs: 20 representatives from 12 non-governmental organizations (including the Union of Secondary School Students and the Education Community), business sector: 10 companies, including the Chamber of Commerce, international organizations; teachers: 21, professional associates: 5; Covid-19 and vulnerable groups: 1,055 respondents online, decision-makers, professional staff of schools, NGOs – 11, students with disabilities – 8, parents of children with disabilities – 18, teachers – 140; Covid-19 effects on students, staff: 75 respondents – psychologists.

The population in the field research consisted of students and teachers of public primary and secondary schools located in the southern, central and northern regions of Montenegro. The research was particularly valuable as it included schools from all regions, levels of education, general and vocational education, schools with students from the Roma and Egyptian population, students with disabilities and difficulties in development, large urban (number of students up to 1,800), suburban and rural schools and schools with students from Albanian speaking areas.

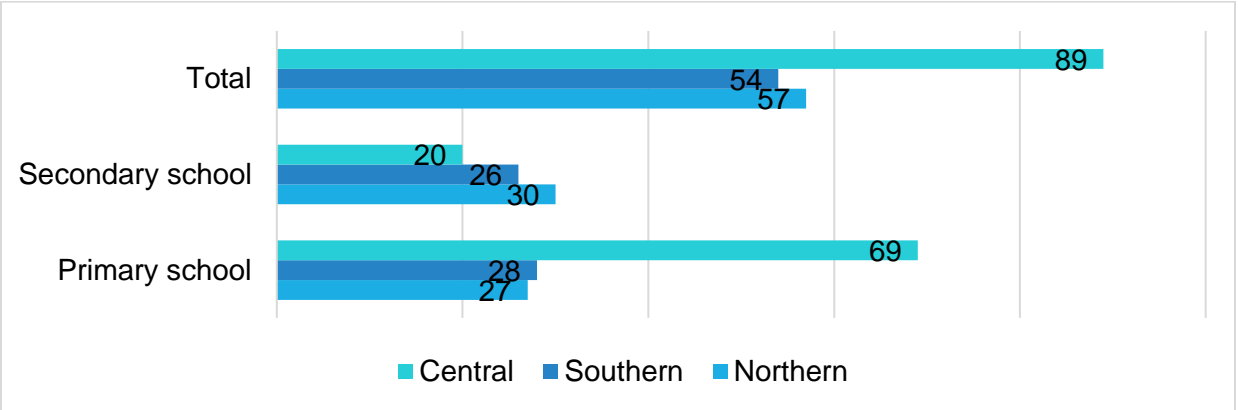
A total of 43 focus groups were conducted. An overview of the number of focus groups, according to the level of education and the population of participants is presented in Graph 1. Focus groups were conducted in primary and secondary schools in order to obtain developmental-age and educational-program data. The total number of respondents – students was 265 (110 boys, 155 girls). The focus groups were implemented in thirteen primary schools and seven secondary schools from all regions of Montenegro, with respect for the principles of inclusivity and equal representation of urban, suburban, rural and schools with different numbers of students (Graph 2). The target group was a total of 200 teachers (26 male, 174 female) from primary and secondary schools (Graph 3). The focus groups were designed and implemented through active participation in the form of a dynamic workshop approach.



Graph 1: Overview of the number of focus groups



Graph 2: Primary and secondary school students in focus groups



Graph 3: Teachers, by region, in the focus groups

After we had reviewed, processed and formulated our findings, conclusions and recommendations from focus groups with students and teachers, we proceeded to validate the data through a process of collaborative focus groups with parents. Each of the focus groups with parents included a total of six members in each group, three fathers and three mothers.

Consultation process findings – conclusions of desk analysis findings and focus groups with students, teachers, parents

The findings that are presented include those obtained from both the desk analysis and from the field research. First, are the key conclusions resulting from the methodological procedures. An overview of the key similarities and differences, obtained from methodologically different procedures, is presented in Table 4. In the following chapters, the findings are organized by thematic areas.

Regarding primary school students, Covid-19 left negative effects on their education in terms of habits, motivation, socializing, mental and physical health. Conversely, there is newfound scope for expressing creativity and innovation, and the way of viewing schooling has changed somewhat. New experiences, such as the perspective of belonging have become much more important, as has the combining of traditional values and virtues with digital and modern curriculum content.

As for secondary school students, there has been a decline in motivation, in good habits, in the acceptance of responsibility and in the quality and quantity of knowledge assimilated. Furthermore, Covid-19 has had a detrimental impact on the developmental of these older students, first and foremost in relation to their psycho-emotional well-being. It is not only necessary to improve conditions for them, it also important to modernize the teaching process and to ensure that it is implemented by competent and responsible teachers with strong integrity, and in such a way that students are adequately prepared to embark on their independent personal and professional lives.

From the focus group for teachers, we concluded that Covid-19 revealed the state of play in the education system. It is necessary to strengthen teacher competency, to revise teaching content, the number of classes, the subjects taken, the organization of the curriculum, and to also emphasize the connections between education, the environment and the labor market. The above should be implemented in schools that are equipped with a modern infrastructure, where students can develop creative, critical and analytical thinking, teamwork, i.e., appropriate skills for the 21st century.

Regarding parents, the impression gained was that there was a strong need to express general dissatisfaction with the system, its quality, organization, purpose, results, and effectiveness. They considered that radical changes were necessary – in terms of quality, values, relationships, the overall education being offered and communication. The reforms should

highlight the importance of education as highest priority and followed by strong support and commitment of the government and its leaders.

Differences were observed in the way that individuals expressed their perspectives to cover a wide range of differing needs; the overall view, however, was that the current situation negatively affected the quality of development as well as academic outcomes. A discrepancy was observed in terms of self-perception and this affected mutual relations; an individual's perception of him or herself lacked objectivity and it was evident that self-criticism, synergy, shared vision and direction were definitely lacking. 'Bottom down' solutions were clearly under-utilized, especially in the area of resources, e.g. work models conceived and proposed for children with disabilities (school portal – link for inclusive education). It is necessary to revive the trust in and authority of decision-makers.

Overall, there was agreement that changes were required regarding the values that underpin goals. It was also agreed that rehabilitation should be offered to vulnerable groups to help with the general strengthening of good habits, the provision of quality education, and with improving the focus on learning and work. The same level of consensus also applied to increasing the workload and competency of teachers, along with the need to improve their communication skills when dealing with students. For such matters, prerequisites are important in order to achieve financial stability and sustainability in areas such as working and learning conditions, professional development and professional support. Finally, to achieve what is necessary, general consensus, understanding, dialogue, responsibility and the proper use of potential and resources is essential. Thus, it can be hoped that students of all ages will be able to spend a full-day stay at school and that they will benefit from evidence-based planning.

We formed networks of influence concerning the quality and effectiveness of education. Regarding key influences, the quality and effectiveness of education stems from initial and further professional development and from adequate financing, conditions and equipment. Furthermore, professional support and a well-defined curriculum, supported by adequate and stimulating conditions, lead to high quality education that has a long-term personal and social impact (effectiveness). The networks indicated the impact of financing, conditions, infrastructure, competency, services and organization (curriculum) on the quality of education provided. At the same time, it was seen that quality had an impact on fairness, inclusiveness, and equality.

Table 4: Data comparison

Area	Similarity	Difference			
		Desk	Teachers	Students	Parents
Recovery – Covid-19 – rehabilitation and recovery from effects	Support for students, individual approach and differentiation, socio-emotional competences, community services, development of habits, encouraging motivation, supplementary content/ extracurricular activities, socialization skills, behavior, focus on vulnerable students –those with special educational needs, Roma and Egyptian population, family allowance recipients, those from remote areas (commuters), in the initial and/or final grades	Development- academic response, teachers' self-development	Content base, more professional associates, more functional organization	Teacher communication	Decentration, empathy, self-criticism
Transforming education	Curriculum change (to make it integrated, focused, applicable, flexible, elective), the application	Promotion of early learning, timely enrolment, General	Culture of responsibility, status, content bases,	Belonging to school, peer	Meaningful and functional breaks

	of digital content in teaching, testing. Interaction, experiential, life and practical integration and learning, focus on professional training, monitoring and evaluation of teachers' work	Education Strategy, in accordance with European and international practices, standards, evidence-based and indicator-based planning	appropriate administration, focus on IT literacy	support, more frequent repetition	
Goals, principles	Fairness, inclusiveness, interactivity, transitivity, applicability, competencies, modernity	Competitiveness, development, democracy, comparability	Collaboration, externality, integrity, functionality, responsibility	Practicality, empathy, equality, stimulation, possibility of choice	Reciprocity of relations, constructiveness, synergy.
Financing	Financing to support quality. Increasing investment, full school day (eight hours of classes), improvement of conditions, equipment	Distribute funds rationally according to effects (achieve balance between earnings and investments).	Investment in services, smaller number of students per class, staff planning and training	Accessibility of information and buildings	According to performance, working time

Thematic area – Recovery from Covid-19

The impact of Covid-19 has had an adverse effect on learning achievements, the quality of knowledge assimilated, work habits, perceptions concerning school and learning and teachers' attitudes. In addition, the following negative trends were observed: developmental and academic stagnation, regression and insecurity, reduced levels of initiative, poor motivation, a reduction in attention-spans and a poor attitude towards obligations. Those who have been particularly affected are children with disabilities (autism in particular), children from rural areas, the Roma and Egyptian populations, those living in socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances, first-year and final-year students in primary and secondary schools and children attending third-level vocational schools. There is now a high level of agreement that the idea of reducing the duration of classes to 30 minutes was counterproductive and ineffective; it affected motivation, habits and quality – namely, teachers could not explain the material to their students within the given time and parents could not devote themselves to 'teaching' their children because they had to work. Teaching time was reduced and consequently expectations were not so high.

Despite these problems, the pandemic improved the capability of both students and teachers to communicate using information technology; their creativity, readiness to accept changes and become more flexible and adaptable were, however, positive spin offs. The burden for families is clearly noticeable, especially concerning a desire to make up for what has been missed. Teachers were quite busy throughout the pandemic period, but they did not experience any kind of intense emotional burnout. The most frequently observed effects suffered by teachers/adults were anxiety, depression, and effects related to concerns over the behaviour, socialization, and emotional functioning of children. It was evident that the current norms related to employment of school support staff are too high in terms of the number of children per professional associate – this resulted in children in larger schools having a reduced chance of benefitting from a psychological framework to help them with their growth and development; conversely, children in smaller, rural areas were completely deprived of any right to such a framework. In all cases, this ultimately led to the risk of inequality.

Research into the impact of measures introduced to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus showed a range of negative consequences regarding the health, behavior and mental health of children and young people in Montenegro. It showed that first and second grade primary school students struggled to follow classes on television. Socializing with peers, extracurricular activities and training sessions were missed. As for eighth and ninth-graders, 48.7% of them declared that distance learning was a burden for them and that they had too many obligations to achieve everything. A smaller number, 29.9%, had great or partial difficulty communicating with their teachers when they needed to clarify some of the material they had been given. One in three respondents in the third and fourth grades of secondary school stated that it was difficult for them to be active during online classes.

The research entitled 'Effects of Covid-19 on vulnerable groups' showed that the dominant effect had been on education, with consequences evident in: the quality of teaching, socialization, knowledge, work habits, perceptions concerning school and learning and teachers' attitudes. The findings showed that children from the central region were the most deprived during the school closure phase, that support was most absent for those living in the north, and that the least affected were those living on the coast, where individualized and adapted work was provided. The absence of direct work, direct experience, and the 30-minute duration of classes were all given as reasons for the negative impact that was felt. A lack of services was also noted.

In the focus groups, primary school students pointed out that the Covid-19 period had been extraordinary, explaining that it had affected the overall way in which they functioned and brought into question the basis for any further education. One advantage, however, that they pointed out was that their IT literacy had increased and that they had gained familiarity with a lot of new applications. They also indicated that online teaching had been ineffective and that they had had to study much more than usual. The fact that they had had to study alone at home had been particularly challenging for them (in an unstructured teaching environment). Initially, they had followed the 'Learn at Home' campaign, but they had soon got bored with it.

"It is as if someone took away two years of our lives. Most of us did not study and thus we lost our work habits. I used to be able to focus and learn three or four lessons at once, but now I cannot even one lesson at a time. I wonder what all those facts I have to learn will do for me. The criteria have been lowered, it is easy to get a good grade."

Regarding how Covid-19 had affected the education of students in secondary schools, we found that the education system had deteriorated since the very beginning of online classes,

because *teaching from home is much less important than regular classes at school*. The acquired knowledge was far short of what it should have been. The whole situation surrounding Covid-19 had led to a *loss of responsibility and habits among students*. Attending classes was easy to avoid, which they did. In terms of *catch-up, they noticed that they were getting a lot of information in a short time because the schedule was very short*.

“School does keep us moving”

Teachers also believed that the impact of Covid-19 on the education process had been negative. *Negative consequences are visible in all segments – learning, behavior, physical and mental health, socialization*. Continuity and quality in learning and grading were lost, and with 30-minute classes it was impossible to retrieve what had been lost. Poverty was more visible in marginalized groups and in the general population. Also, *in the literacy development phase in the first cycle, the absence of direct work is counterproductive and does not lead to the acquisition of skills*. It was also noticeable that children now write in the language of the smartphones. Difficulties were also identified regarding *undefined working hours* and concerning mandatory contact with students which extended all day long without any rules or structure.

“Corona and online teaching have exposed the truth about the education we have – regardless of the extent and manner of work, it turned out that only grades mattered eventually. When the information that the grades would not be lowered became public, at that moment the school year was over for parents and children. It is difficult to motivate children”.

Regarding the impact of Covid-19 on families, respondents believed that time spent together had been gained, but that challenges concerning spending such time in a quality manner had been an issue; there were questions raised about whether this had been dedicated to children in the right way. Their daily routine had changed due to the pandemic, but had never returned to normal; the changes had actually been retained until the present time. They believed that there were examples of families in which tension and violence had increased. Online teaching and shortened classes had affected the quality of the knowledge they had acquired – it had become superficial, without any elaboration, proper understanding had not been perceived as important. Children seemed disorganized, aimless, without focus. The students seemed to study to fulfill requirements and get grades rather than studying for knowledge. Grading and the quality of knowledge assimilated did not correspond. Covid-19 was deemed to have very clearly highlighted the weaknesses of externally assessing knowledge, as it showed a significant discrepancy between grades and knowledge. The assessment of knowledge focused on students, rather than being focused on monitoring the quality of the teaching process and the work of teachers.

Teachers' work had been absolved, and children had suffered the consequences. Parents were aware that teachers had been under pressure, but they also felt that they had not all adapted equally to the circumstances and that not all of them had the same level of competency. It is important to inform and empower parents and build their IT literacy skills.

To fully recover from the effects of Covid-19 requires a developmental-academic approach with attention paid to the following areas: catching up, restoring good habits, building motivation and application, adapting to new learning and work techniques, assimilating knowledge, developing a healthy socio-emotional status, practicing good behavior and learning skills to face and overcome future challenges. The following elements are also necessary in order to make the required progress: support to be provided for students, especially vulnerable ones; the teaching process should consider individual needs and differentiation; the content of the curriculum should be developed; goals should be clearly defined; outcomes should be measured and monitored; inequality and prejudice should be prevented. Participation in community service programmes and activities should be encouraged. 45-minute classes should be reintroduced and the continuity of classes should be restored to make up for missed time. Information must be provided on transition periods, career orientation, mentoring, and coaching. A more functional style of organization within schools is required, along with additional support for staff and longer working hours. Teachers should be offered the opportunity to work on developing their personal skills in a variety of areas (stress management, dealing with anxiety, communication skills), as well in areas concerning their work with students (developmental characteristics and needs, models and techniques of learning and motivation, recognition of emotional and behavioral challenges and how to deal with them). Teachers should be helped to design teaching based on the needs of individual students, to differentiate between needs and levels, to adopt project-based teaching and to build up an adequate base of teaching materials and resources, auxiliary literature, didactic material, and video presentations. The existing resources should be utilized more (especially I inclusive education), with the aim of making up for missed knowledge and lost time. Better quality specialized work materials should be provided in accordance with modern standards and AT and equipment (tablets, computers, educational games) should be used on a regular basis. The key to achieving a quality education is to encourage early development, learning, participation and support (particularly considering the increase in autism spectrum disorders and the unequal and/or lack of adequate response to them). A greater number of professional associates is needed, along with a higher level of professionalism, principles and legality. It is important to offer psycho-social support services (developing emotional literacy, communication skills, work on motivation, work habits, independence in learning). As part of this campaign, it is necessary to

talk about the importance of mental health, life skills and general competency. The response of institutions needs to be well-coordinated, on both cross- and intersectoral levels.

Thematic area – Transforming education

Quality is an area that requires special attention. This relates to all of the following areas: the achievements of Montenegrin students in terms of learning outcomes; the principles and methods of work; the level of training and the qualifications of teaching staff; learning areas; skills and competencies. The quality of education in Montenegro is low when observed in an international context (PISA and TIMSS). This brings into question the effectiveness of investment in education in Montenegro. In both of the aforementioned contexts, more than 40% of students did not acquire the minimum level of competencies, despite the fact that they were included in the education system. The level of achievement was recorded as being on the border of functional literacy; competencies were formally defined but were delivered without practical class experience and with no connection to real life scenarios. A discrepancy between the results of national external audits and international studies was also evident. Teaching materials are currently too extensive and dysfunctional; children spend very little time in schools. Differences in the success of learning in Montenegro are related to the economic, social and cultural status of families. For example, despite an increase in attendance in all levels of education, despite the fact that 56% of children from Roma settlements completed primary education, only 3% of them have completed secondary education. Furthermore, MICS findings indicated that significant statistical differences were seen when compared with the ECDI index – the average ECDI index for children who attended preschool education was 97, but this was significantly lower for those who do not attend preschool – 83.

Adequate indicators were unfortunately lacking in many areas concerning the quality of the education system (which is also regionally imbalanced). Findings were recorded as follows: northern municipalities have a problem with migration, staff (young people move to bigger cities), children do not enroll in the schools they would choose or like to attend, but go to those that are accessible to them. Reforms that are not considered as essential are treated in a declarative manner to simply change things on paper, while scientific developments are not sufficiently followed through. The competency of teachers and their willingness to adapt to modern teaching methods are major issues. The focus of learning is on memorizing facts, not on developing critical thinking and social skills. There is a significant mismatch between the education system and the

labor market, despite significant progress that had been achieved but reversed due to the COVID10 school closures. In vocational schools, practical teaching has been transformed into theoretical teaching due to a lack of conditions for performing practical exercises. This situation is further aggravated by a lack of psychological and social services in schools. There is also a lack of special educational needs teachers and speech therapists. At a university level, the system is outdated and has not adapted to either the needs of practice nor of demand.

Research and assessment of local policies relating to youth and their perceptions/needs in 15 local self-government areas showed that the main problems included: unemployment; a lack of cultural, sporting and social events; the possibility or potential for such activities was limited or non-existent. The same situation was evident regarding experiential and/or elective activities, practical or hands on types of learning, the opportunity to gain insight into real-life situations and the environment. All of this most pushes young people to think about leaving the place in which they live, or to actually leave.

The findings of the focus groups indicated that students strive to learn by developing their logical thinking, trying to acquire life and work skills on an ad hoc basis. They tend to believe that teaching is generally dull and boring and that it should be combined with projects and assignments that could be done online or via other technological means. Curriculum content should be more interesting and more connected to life. Because of too much information that has a very low functional value, they believe that classes should be less lecture-style and that they should include more examples and should be based on significant key information (without unnecessary, uninteresting information). It is very important to provide more extra-curricular activities. There was great agreement among the primary school students that the *quality of what they learn, organization, dynamics, teaching methodology, and appeal depend on the teacher*. It was suggested that teachers should work in a contemporary, modern way, that they should use ICT, encourage more interaction with students and that they should show more respect for students, their rights, wishes and needs... in addition to all of this, they should have more empathy and better communication skills. The focus should, first and foremost, be on strengthening key skills: socio-emotional and critical thinking. Gymnasium students studying general subjects, unlike vocational school students, did not have any practical experience at all (contact with the labour market), but they were offered skill-developing subjects. Their objections related to the textbooks they were given because they were old and out of date. Poor and outdated material for practical teaching was also highlighted as a significant problem. Secondary school students felt that education regarding the use of technology was neglected, as was the use of technology itself.

Both of these issues could potentially have a positive impact on learning and facilitate activities in class. Digitalization could also greatly reduce the physical burden of consumables (for example reducing or eliminating the use of paper – developing an eco/sustainable dimension in education) as well as being eco-friendly.

“The learning material is too extensive in many cases. There is a lot of irrelevant material that we will never need in our lives, and we will forget it in the blink of an eye.”

Teachers estimated that the volume of material remained the same after the reforms, but that the number of classes they taught had decreased in some subjects; this was perceived as a great problem. Research found that better integration and correlation of both teaching content and practical activities/experience is necessary. Students do not sufficiently master practical life skills. A quality selection of elective subjects should be decided without compromising or increasing the norm (the number of classes taught) for teachers. In smaller and bilingual schools, students sometimes cannot choose an elective subject based on their interests because groups cannot be formed (not enough students). Teaching does not maximize the use of technical developments. Textbooks often do not contain necessary, clear or acceptable explanations. Teachers are not sufficiently motivated and their position in society is not at the level they deserve. Administrative work is a burden for them and they do not have the necessary psychological and pedagogical competencies to cope with student issues; this is particularly relevant in subject teaching. Some teachers still insist on rote learning and resist the benefits of digitalization, a resource that should be integrated with standard teaching.

Parents pointed out that activities with children in secondary schools are inadequate and that approaches used to stimulate their interest and the way their development is monitored is less than satisfactory. A lack of strong support for teachers was clearly evident and it was felt that they should be monitored, coached, and mentored. Not all teachers work on self-development enough and consequently they do not develop sufficiently as professionals. Some qualifications are also questionable. Reform is imperative. Teaching is currently geared towards rote learning rather than at developing analytical skills. Insufficient ground is covered with children; in general, the period of time they spend in school is very short, too short for them to develop adequate study habits, positive attitudes towards learning, and for them to assimilate a reasonable quantity of quality knowledge. Commitment towards building a meaningful individual teacher-child relationship is poor. Communication in classes is inadequate, as is the case with many parents. There is a lack of synergy, decentration.

The transformation directives state that curriculum should be modern, functional and responsive to improve educational processes, opportunities and performance. Changes in the curriculum are aimed mostly at integrating subjects into practical situations and environments to make them relevant. *The focus should be on practical knowledge, personal growth and development*, on the development of entrepreneurship and on civic values. It should, also, of course be on the competencies of teachers, on mutual cooperation, on exchange and appreciation, on methods of (inter)active research, on collaborative and critical teaching, on the general culture of responsibility, on commitment, on belonging to a school, on the greater animation of students and on the possibilities of choice. A basic framework should be established to enable students to choose the level, amount, and type of information that would be useful to them for life and for practical use. Students should be able to choose subjects according to their interests, with only three or four subjects elected as main subjects. The development of key competencies is of paramount importance. Such competencies include: literacy, mathematical competence, digital literacy and emotional literacy. Learning material should relate to the labor market, to life and to the environment. Opportunities should be provided for students to undertake seasonal employment as this would give them access to future employers.

All of the above should be accompanied by support for teachers and students and their initial and professional training should focus on strengthening key competencies including, in particular: socio-emotional, digital-information-technology, creativity. It is necessary to improve not only the position, description, scope, capacity and domain of teachers' work, but also their attitudes, values and understanding of their role as educators. In addition, it is necessary to plan well and to train staff through practice and by building on their competencies. This is important not only in subject areas, but also in terms of their role as professionals, as educators. Reforms should be carried out in teacher training institutions – the method for selecting candidates should be reviewed to include stricter and more thorough admission criteria, including the criteria for the teacher's professional exam. Support and advice needs to be provided in their first years as teachers.

In terms of innovations, it is necessary to improve the quality and functionality of textbooks. Also, digitalization should be accompanied by the development of safe and secure IT literacy for all. It is desirable to provide a full-day program for all students; if this is not possible, it should, at least, be introduced for all students in lower primary school grades. The number of students in each class should not exceed 20. It is necessary to improve, enhance and enrich the programmes that take place outside of the teaching process – extra-curricular activities, especially those offered in smaller communities, do not offer enough opportunities and content. It would be worth

thinking about designing activities that could be run during school breaks, or to consider reducing the current long breaks and replacing them, in part, with camps, seminars and professional-practical experience.

Thematic area – Goals, benchmarks, reforms

In the Draft Second Voluntary National Review: Montenegro and SDGs 2016-2021, it is indicated that Agenda 2030 and SDGs have been fully integrated into the national framework through the National Sustainable Development Strategy to 2030. Progress was achieved in four out of seventeen goals (Goals 1, 8, 9 and 12). For the other goals, however, it was assessed that there was not enough data to determine a trend. Almost two-thirds of SDG tasks (109 out of 169) are strongly related to EU policies. However, SDGs are not the focus of competent institutions in terms of achieving their full formulation and intention. For SDG 1: the rate of risk of poverty dropped to 22.6% in 2020¹⁷, and a positive trend was noted in poverty, social exclusion and deprivation of children, but the earlier rate of 38.6% is high and concerning. Poverty is increasing in the north – the rate there (44.5%) is four times higher than it is in the southern region. For SDG 4: advances have been made, such as increasing the number of children included in early education and education being generally more inclusive and equitable. However, inequalities regarding access persist when it comes to vulnerable groups, quality, infrastructure, results and learning outcomes. For SDG 5: the empowerment of women and an improved response to violence against women and girls has been observed, but this still remains unacceptably ineffective.

Overall, goals and benchmarks should represent an evidence-based response to needs. The goals of the reform should be defined holistically, to create a knowledge-based system and to enable learning skills required for living in the 21st century. The curriculum should be field-oriented rather than subject-oriented. Educational programmes should focus on setting achievable learning outcomes through an individualized approach. The application of teaching methods and techniques should enable connections to be made between what is learned and the practicalities of the labor market, life and the environment. This means that impressionistic, experiential learning can only be acquired through experience; it should also be noted that

¹⁷Pursuant to SDG 1, the rate should be reduced to half of its current level by 2030; thus, it should be about 12%.

vocational school students need to have contact with the real labor market during the course of their education.

It is important to promote early development and learning, timely enrolment, developmentally adequate participation and work. The General Education Strategy should be the starting point for elaborating on any programmes offered to provide an equal response, inclusion and participation for all students. The quality of education should be achieved by revising the curriculum: it should be relevant, integrated, interactive, applicable, directed at skills, attitudes and values, through the internationally standardized competencies of teachers (knowledge, skills, work methods, culture of responsibility, professional ethics), in such a way that the duration of a child's stay at school enables him or her to fully achieve all of the given outcomes and competencies. It should also serve to take pressure off families and provide children with all the content they need in one place.

It is necessary to promote equity and enrolment rates at all levels, to increase the coverage of preschool education, and to launch campaigns to raise awareness of the importance of early learning and participation. Secondary education should become mandatory. Work should continue on the coverage of vulnerable categories. Here the needs of children for whom education is less accessible should be targeted; focused support should be provided and the quality of education should be raised. Integration measures for children from the Roma and Egyptian populations should be considered, and the number of children with special educational needs should be increased at all levels of education. The practice of monitoring student well-being should be developed and prevention and support programs should be offered. It is also necessary to improve the function of monitoring, evaluation and the use of data; a system of social and child protection should be created to respond to needs by providing specialized services at a community level. Such a system should also provide support for improving education and health care. Support for the socio-economically disadvantaged should be provided through the strengthening of local services. Efforts should be made to animate young people; they should be provided with opportunities to become involved in cultural and sporting events and they should be offered the chance to become involved in activities associated with their future professional lives. Such activities should serve to provide relevant links and connections between education and the labour market.

Also, practice and culture in schools should be based on evidence, supported by cooperation and joint institutional planning. It is necessary to create an environment in which activities demonstrate connections between theory and practice, where monitoring and evaluation

are carried out and where compliance with EU and international standards is present. Thus, through such action, principles will be achieved.

It is necessary to implement a smart integration of digital tools and technologies in education and to exploit their potential for raising the quality, relevance, and inclusiveness of the system. The focus should be on the correct use of digital technologies, digital security, digital identity, the functional application of digital content, the application of standards and methodological frameworks for quality control and for the improvement of digital textbooks and auxiliary educational materials.

Primary school students gave high priority to inclusive values when asked what would compensate them most for the negative effects of Covid-19. They also listed curriculum changes, conditions to support any new curriculum and teacher training to accompany the changes as being of great importance. In this regard, they were quite well harmonized regionally, and the same applied to the content of the curricula. Differences were observed in terms of infrastructure, accessibility, equipment and digitalization; all of these elements could be linked to general socio-economic development. Furthermore, the same applied to the organization of teaching; interestingly, this could be linked to the differences observed during the desk research regarding an imbalance in the number of students per class depending on the region in which they lived. The reform goals should be defined in relation to the integrated, connected, basic and initial curriculum. This new curriculum offers the possibility of choice, individualization and knowledge assimilated through research; it also offers other significant factors such as equality, the greater inclusion of all students, work on the prevention of discrimination, understanding, learning about means of communication (such as sign language), decentration and empathy.

Secondary school students were more practice and future-oriented. They were sensitive to some 'vulnerable groups', but were dominantly oriented towards the labour market and improving working conditions. They were focused on issues regarding content and the overall organization of education. They felt that equality should be encouraged through material assistance, psychological and pedagogical support, and that teachers should be informed about students' problems and how to address them. They stated that more focus should be put on greater participation in social life. Action should be taken to prevent teachers' prejudices – they should be more tolerant towards students. The peer support model was especially favoured. Students believed that project activities should be encouraged to achieve inclusive education; it was felt that such activities should include all categories of students (those with developmental disabilities, Roma and Egyptian populations, children from rural areas, children from families with

poor socio-economic status, etc.). It was important to students that diversity should be promoted and that there should be a positive emphasis on personal and social engagement. They also wanted to see the introduction of programmes designed to improve health, in particular mental health. They considered that an improvement in the infrastructure was necessary to enhance sports, educational and cultural activities, to enable them to have more productive free time, to provide them with opportunities to become engaged in educational programmes, to provide them with support for their personal development, to provide information, to help them regarding the appropriate use of technology and social networks, to offer them relevant and appropriate work-related and professional training and finally, to encourage competitiveness.

Among the teachers, there was considerable agreement about the need to reform the curriculum and about the importance of raising competency and professional responsibilities. However, there were also some differences – teachers in primary education prioritized equality and inclusivity, while secondary school teachers focused more on equipment in schools, explaining that IT competency depended on individual competency. It was significant that personal and professional responsibility were highly ranked.

Parents indicated that educational goals should include reciprocity in relationships and that constructive dialogue with more intense responsibility would make a big difference. It was also felt that teachers should be aware the long-term effects of their work on children's knowledge, on their preparedness for life and on their competence. It was considered important to work on children's perception of school, to make them feel welcome, supported, and to make the experience interesting for them. It was felt that attitudes towards grading should be changed among children, teachers and parents. The key messages and main strategic ideas were as follows: parents indicated that it was necessary to introduce a full 8-hour school day; that it should be ensured that curriculum content was more complete; that children should learn more; that their understanding of knowledge should be checked and that they should be required to apply it in class. These were viewed as the most significant elements on which the reform should focus.

The agreed goals and benchmarks included the following: integrity, responsibility, relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, comprehensiveness, participation, democracy, accessibility, equality, equity, fairness, comparability, continuity, transitivity, applicability, sustainability, development, practicality, inclusiveness, stimulation, innovation, interactivity, integration, competence, competitiveness, empathy, modernity, functionality, collaboration, equipment, openness and possibility of choice.

Thematic area – Financing education

The education sector is predominantly financed from the state budget. The other main sources of funding are contributions from parents and institutions' own funds. Public investment in education is relatively low by international standards. Although the Government of Montenegro increased its relative spending on education from 7.6% in 2015 to 8.2% in 2017, it is still at the lower end of the international scale. The share of the total capital budget allocated to education has significantly decreased since 2016; it amounted to just 5% in 2020. Such allocation is diametrically opposed to the need for an urgent solution to the critical problems that are evident in the infrastructure. Part of the education budget is used to cover wage-related costs; consequently, after paying salaries, less money is available to pay for other items, such as materials. Thus, the constantly increasing element of the budget allocated for salaries represents a risk to physical conditions, to sustainability, efficiency and effectiveness. In terms of technology, the dominant issues include: lack of equipment, poor internet connections, parental and teacher incompetence, a misunderstanding regarding the role of IT equipment, poor curriculum content and poor lesson plans.

Regarding financing, the main problem is the physical infrastructure (the number and configuration of educational units in all public pre-school, primary school and secondary school institutions). Namely, the capacity of buildings, the availability of equipment and the physical layout of teaching space do not provide an environment that is able to adequately foster quality and success. The highest priority is the infrastructure in primary education which is characterized by extremes; in some cases, children are educated in classes with very small number of students and in others they are educated in overcrowded classes where schools organize classes in multiple shifts. Regarding secondary education, the issue of school capacity is less significant; this level of education is, however, also characterized by inconsistency but this is mainly due to lack of equipment (also, due to the lack of resources, particularly in vocational schools, the insufficiently pro-active approach of school management, as well as due to the project based approach which is not sustainable). The school infrastructure in general is unsatisfactory and the equipment available to students is inadequate for the following activities: general curriculum

lessons, physical education, laboratory exercises and information technology. To sum up, the facilities that are available are unsuitable for the implementation of modern teaching. Many schools have very limited or no access to the internet. There are too few school facilities throughout the country and existing facilities are overcrowded.

Teaching would be more interesting if teachers used more presentations in class, if they encouraged students to look for information that they do not have in the textbook on the internet. They would like to have a laptop or computer in every classroom.

The availability of human resources is uneven– the number of teachers does not reflect the mobility of the population; there is an imbalance in the number of students and teachers in certain municipalities and the teaching staff is aging. The requirements to qualify as a teacher are not fully aligned with the dominant European requirements in relation to qualifications and diplomas. The system of teacher education and professional development is currently being developed; it needs to be modernized in terms of theory, to be based on evidence and to include evaluation, practice, training and mentoring.

Education policy, at a state level, does not consider the hyper-production of members of certain professions, nor indeed does it consider the lack of others. There are no adequate incentives and the result is a serious imbalance. The process of recognizing teacher training diplomas/certificates should be stricter and the equivalence/level of standards between them should be monitored and moderated. Professional associations should focus on the quality of the teaching profession and on protecting teachers. The combination of probationary periods followed by full teacher status qualifying for indefinite employment offer a very comfortable position which, unfortunately, does not always result in the delivery of quality.

Another challenge for the education system is the relatively small number of school psychologists who are available to respond to the needs of students and parents. The support that is currently provided is not adequate to cater for needs, nor for the number of students who require help; there are no adequate locations for conducting interviews in private, away from the teaching environment and time and availability are limited by inflexible norms. Services are not equally available to support all areas of the education system, and there is no coherent, integrated community response.

There is a big problem with the lack of professional support, especially psychological and social services in schools – the norms are too high for the number of children per professional

associate – which reduces the chance for children (in larger schools and in rural areas) to have the opportunity for supported growth.

Demographic changes are clearly visible, but there is no adequate response to them. The number of school-age children is decreasing overall but there are different demographic trends: the demand for education in urban areas is increasing, while the demand for education in rural areas is decreasing.

The labor market, in particular, shows that there is a mismatch in terms of skills gained through the education system and the needs of the labor market. This is evident in the shortage of available teaching staff and also in the demand for individuals with particular qualifications, especially professional, digital and IT.

Conditions and financing were also discussed with students. They pointed out that it was necessary to invest in classrooms and computer equipment because this greatly affected the quality of teaching. Every classroom should be equipped with adequate conditions for teaching – e.g. laboratories should have scientific equipment for carrying out practical experiments and subject-based classrooms should also be improved. Schools should look nicer, and should not look like abandoned hospitals or prisons (especially when the power goes out during the second shift). Assistance should be provided at a local level, as well as by the state to ensure that school is accessible to everyone. Free transportation should be provided for students from rural areas. Therefore, efforts should be made towards the improvement of conditions, equipment, accessibility of facilities and information, digitalization of content, textbooks, materials, work methods, applications and visual (video) content.

Young people are forced to pay for any sports, creative and cultural activities, and other social event that are offered, but often there are none available in any case.

Teachers believe that the key to improving the overall situation is to increase investment in education, not only in the infrastructure but also in the quality of education provided and in the support system. Professional services should be available in schools, regardless of the number of students and teachers should be of a higher quality. The general level of ICT competency should be assessed and the equipment available to students and teachers should be checked and reviewed. Technical and digital equipment in schools should be greatly improved. Ideally, the state should finance one meal per day for every student at school. The personal income of teachers and professional associates should be representative of their status and should also be secure. Local administration should be involved in improvement the quality of educational

institutions and in investing in them; the position of such administrative bodies is currently under-utilized.

Parents believed that adequate financing should be available to reflect the needs of: achieving outcomes, living in modern times, supporting important initiatives, supporting the work of teachers and providing a quality education. Teachers' salaries should be adjusted to reflect the time they spend in school. It is necessary to monitor the work of teachers – educational institutions should be more engaged in this – not in terms of inspections, but rather to provide teachers with support. It is necessary to eradicate the current practice of private lessons; children should get everything they need at school. Such an incomplete education has a negative effect on students; they complain that they have to work harder on their own at home, that they are often forced to do extra work in private lessons and that they have to financially provide the means to compensate for what they have missed out on at school.

Finally, it is necessary to allocate more funds to provide an adequately distributed response to primary goals. Such goals create the conditions to achieve the outcomes that define a quality education: infrastructure, equipment, work models and methods, learning results, professional support. Financing should be more oriented towards better conditions, adequate equipment and quality education, to achieve a balance between investment and salaries. The school infrastructure should receive adequate financial support and should be monitored through the implementation of a suitable program. Recommendations include modernizing classrooms, providing adequate equipment (computers, laboratories, material for subject-based classrooms), introducing IT systems and ensuring that every classroom is equipped with computers and tablets. It is especially important to make schools accessible to all students, to install lifts and ramps, to remove communication barriers and to resolve any other issues that might have a negative effect on students with special educational needs.

Furthermore, it is necessary to promote all aspects of digital technology and to integrate it into the curriculum: as a means of learning, as innovative practice, by providing equipment, by introducing stable internet connections, by providing any necessary devices, by strengthening digital competency, by providing and increasing knowledge, by increasing self-confidence, by encouraging good habits for safe, functional, efficient and effective use, by establishing an electronic library with teaching and learning materials, by encouraging the use of applications and platforms. It is also of paramount importance for the education system and the labour market to be harmonized, to align education with the requirements of employers. There should be inclusive and participatory extra-curricular activities, cultural activities, sporting events and informal social

gatherings. Support should be provided to all students – norms for professional associates should be more flexible and services between different sectors and within the community should also be offered.