Report on the Consultations Conducted on the Transformation of Education in the Republic of Serbia

June 2022

Content

Background information on the consultation process in the Republic of Serbia

In order to prepare for participation in *the Summit*, as well as to prepare the *Statement of Commitment to Education Transformation*, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, with the assistance of the United Nations agencies (UNESCO and UNICEF, which are globally responsible for providing technical support to countries in preparing for participation in the Summit), organised consultations with relevant stakeholders in the education sectors (civil society organisations, academia, parent associations, teaching staff and youth).

Responsible institution: Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, Government of the Republic of Serbia

Support: UNESCO and UNICEF, in co-operation with the UN Resident Coordinator's Office in the Republic of Serbia

Consultation period: April - June 2022

Number of persons involved in consultations: 1,143 persons (636 women; 267 men; 240 unknown)

Method of consultation:

o   Official information and data on public education from strategic documents, as well as written contributions reflecting the future perspective of education transformation (ministries of education, finance, health, and the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia);

o   Available research studies and reports prepared after the 2021 national consultation process on Sustainable Development Goal 4 in relation to the preparation *of* the *Voluntary National Review*;

o   Data obtained through consultations and online surveys (teachers, youth, parents, civil society organisations (CSOs), academia).

The process of conducting consultations in the Republic of Serbia

The Republic of Serbia conducted the consultation process between April and June 2022 in response to the global initiative to foster and accelerate the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*.

Due to the growing need to transform education, especially after a partial interruption in education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (further aggravating inequalities in education), the UN Secretary General launched an initiative to organise **a summit on education transformation**, to be held in New York on 19 September 2022.

Instead of trying to reach an agreement on a new global standard in education, **the focus is on mobilising political ambition, measures, solutions, capacities and resources** to fulfil existing commitments related to achieving global Sustainable Development Goal 4 by 2030. In addition**, the aim of the Transforming Education Summit** is to encourage reimagining education in order to contribute to **overcoming learning losses** caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The event was preceded **by a preparatory summit in Paris** from 28 June to 30 June 2022.

The focus of the consultations consists of four components with the following objectives:

- **Encouraging targeted action** to ensure a full recovery of the education system from the consequences of the pandemic, relying on available evidence of cross-dimensional effects of interruption of education (proper nutrition, protection of girls, health and well-being, learning losses, dropping out/leaving school, failure to re-enrol, etc.).

- **Identifying support packages and priority measures** for the transformation of education and acceleration of progress toward common education-related commitments, building on lessons learned and findings from responses and innovation in the field of education during the pandemic, integrating new thinking, approaches, resources and methods related to learning in education policies and practices.

- **Creating a commitment to increased and more effective public funding of education**, ensuring greater equality in the distribution of funds and greater effectiveness in the implementation of the education process. It would be important to identify additional innovative and intersectoral mechanisms that can ensure sustainable funding of education from national budgets.

- **Reviewing or defining education objectives and benchmarks** in view of the consequences of the pandemic and ambition needed to maximise progress by 2030, based on seven global and thematic SDG4 indicators, confirmed at the Global Education meeting in 2019.

The results of the consultations include **a summary *Report of the Summit Secretariat on the Process of Consultations in Serbia***, as well as inputs that will be found in the ***Statement on Commitment to the Process of Transforming Education in the Republic of Serbia***, stating the obligations of decision-makers in the field of education and consensus on priority measures, building on existing plans, programmes and initiatives to make up for pandemic-related learning losses.

Analysis of the state of play in education

Data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia show *that SDG 4.2.4 Gross early childhood education enrolment ratio in pre-primary education* was 63% (by comparison, the EU target for 2030 is 96%). In absolute numbers, in the 2021/22 school year, 223,559 children attended pre-school education. Of this number, 107,915 (48.3%) were girls and 115,644 (51.7%) were boys. The number of children aged six months to three years was 53,981 (24.1%) and of children aged three years to school age 169,578 (75.9%). The preschool education programme was organised in 463 preschool institutions (162 public preschool institutions, 37 in the territory of Kosovo and Metohija and 300 private institutions), 2,853 facilities (2,429 public and 424 private) and 10,668 education groups. The enrolment rate of children in the compulsory preparatory preschool programme was 97.8%. The compulsory preparatory preschool programme (PPP) was attended by 63,719 children (30,734 girls and 32,985 boys). 59.5% of children attended the full-day preparatory programme and 40.5% of children attended the four-hour programme (data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia).

The Voluntary National Review also states that "inequality in access to high-quality early childhood education services is notable particularly for poor and marginalised children[1]". The same conclusion is confirmed by the *Building Human Capital for Long-term Prosperity* report (World Bank, UNICEF 2022), which states that only 10.5% of children from the poorest quintile and 7% of children from the Roma population living in sub-standard Roma settlements are enrolled in preschool education.

The Education Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia until 2030 states that the participation in primary education in Serbia was 97% in 2020, while the primary school completion rate was 97%. The primary education dropout rate was reduced relative to the previous period and according to the 2022 data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (SORS) was 0.4%. However, it is important to emphasise that the primary school completion rate among students from Roma settlements was significantly lower, at only 64% (2019).[2]

In the Republic of Serbia, secondary education is still optional, but the Education Development Strategy foresees the introduction of compulsory secondary education. *The Education Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia* until 2030 states that the participation in secondary education, according to the 2020 SORS data, was 80% (it is worth noting that the indicators in the baseline year 2019 showed that the participation in secondary education was 87.4% (SORS Annual Report). However, it should be taken into account that the effective rate of transition of students from Roma settlements to secondary school was 55%, while the net rate of secondary school attendance among the Roma was very low and was 28% (2019). The secondary school completion rate was 88% (2020), while the secondary school completion rate for students from Roma settlements was 61% (2019). The secondary school dropout rate was 1.1% (2019), which is significantly better than in EU member states, where 10.2% of young people leave education or training early (EU 2020 target was 10%).

In secondary vocational education, dual education was introduced as a model for implementing the learning process at two locations. In this way, students acquire knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes during theoretical classes and exercises at school, as well as by learning while working in a company. This education model enables the acquisition, improvement and development of competencies in line with labour market needs. Dual education is "focused more on the current labour market demands than on anticipating skills that will be sought after in the future", according

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[1] UNICEF, Serbia - Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey and Serbia - Roma Settlements – Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2014
[2] Education Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia until 2030. Government of the Republic of Serbia, June 2021

to the Voluntary National Review. The basis for the adoption of curricula is the qualification standard, which is set out by the sectoral council for the specific sector. The qualification standard and the curriculum are updated every five years, or more frequently if required by the needs of economy and technological development.

Although the overall rate of participation in education in the Republic of Serbia is high, many children are at risk of being excluded, in particular children with disabilities, Roma children, children from destitute households and rural areas, especially children from mountainous and border areas. Boys and girls of primary school age participate equally in primary education, while the index of gender parity in secondary education of 1.08 demonstrates that girls are at a slight advantage.[3]

Poor learning outcomes are strongly correlated with socio-economic status and geographic location. Expressed in terms of risk, the likelihood that Serbia's poorest students will be functionally illiterate after nine years of schooling is 2.5 times higher than for the overall student population, according to the *Building Human Capital for Long-term Prosperity* report *(World* Bank, UNICEF 2022).

Based on the latest available data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, in 2019, 25.5% of the generation aged 19 to 30 participated in higher education and the rate of continuing education after completing secondary education was 88.7% (SORS). As for the target related to the share of university graduates among 30 to 34-year-olds, it was almost achieved – compared to the planned 35%, 33.5% was reached, which is an increase of over 8 percentage points compared to 2012. However, this percentage was still below the EU average where the number of university graduates in this age group was 40.3% (the EU target for 2020 was 40%).[4]

As a result of negative demographic trends, the number of university students in the Republic of Serbia decreased by about 15% in the past eight years. However, the participation of young people continuing to higher education and the percentage of the population graduating from universities is steadily increasing - according to the latest available data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, the participation in higher education increased from 48% in 2015 to 54.7% in 2019, and the percentage of the population with higher education degrees continues to rise steadily – from 18.7% in 2015 to 20.4% in 2019 (EUROSTAT).[5] When it comes to adult population, the main strategic goal is to increase the participation of adults in adult education programmes and activities. Additional data collected by the Adult Education Survey (AOO) show that Serbia is far from the EU average - the rate of adult participation in some form of formal or non-formal education or training at the national level was 19.8% in 2016, which was significantly below the EU member states' average of 45.2% in 2016. According to the AOO data, adult education is not accessible to all categories, i.e., the network of institutions is not functional and there are still significant systemic barriers to its efficient functioning. Further development will be aimed at increasing the participation in and accessibility of adult education, and increasing the functionality of the existing and further expanding the network of service providers both in formal and non-formal adult education, increasing the supply of trainings addressing the different needs of adults, while putting in place a more efficient accreditation process, especially by introducing short cycles in higher education institutions and distance learning and electronic learning.

The high rate of use of information and communication technologies was reported in young women and men (97% and 95%, respectively[6]), and the rate of participation of young people in formal and

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[3] http://sdg.indikatori.rs/en-us/area/quality-education/?subarea=SDGUN040501&indicator=04050101IND01

[4] Education Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia until 2030. Government of the Republic of Serbia, June 2021

[5] Education Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia until 2030. Government of the Republic of Serbia, June 2021

[6] Republički zavod za statistiku Srbije, Upotreba IKT u Republici Srbiji 2018 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Use of ICT in the Republic of Serbia 2018):
http://sdg.indikatori.rs/en-us/area/quality-education/?subarea=SDGUN040201&indicator=04020101IND02

non-formal education and training in the previous 12 months was stable over the past five years (around 65%), where young women attend some form of education more than young men.[7]

The adoption of the Law on Education System Framework (LESF) in 2009 marked a turning point in the introduction of inclusive education, with a clear strategic commitment of the Republic of Serbia to inclusive education, and an emphasis on equal right to education, without discrimination and segregation, for all children, students and adults. Reform measures have been implemented aimed at developing the entire institutional and education policy framework, mechanisms and procedures for inclusion at the local and institutional level, which included the capacity building of teachers and institutions, establishment of inclusive education teams in institutions, change of the primary school enrolment policy, introduction of individual education plans (IEPs) and pedagogical assistants, provision of the service of personal companion for children and personal assistant for adults, establishment of local intersectoral committees (ISCs) for additional education, health and social support for children, students and adults in the education process, dropout prevention measures, etc.[8]

However, Serbia's Education Development Strategy[9] states that even "after 10 years of implementation of inclusive education, implementation capacities have not yet reached the level of legal novelties and changes. Progress has been made at all levels, but the capacities of teachers and institutions to adopt and implement new practices and knowledge varies considerably, resulting in equity gaps. Although the overall rate of participation in education in the Republic of Serbia is high, a number of children are at risk of being less or partially included, and in particular children with disabilities, Roma children, children from destitute households and small and isolated rural or mountainous areas, especially children from hilly and mountainous and border areas".

The network of education institutions still needs to be adapted to demographic and economic changes.[10] Although significant efforts are made, physical conditions are not adequate in all schools.

The Education Development Strategy defines as Objective 1.9 for the coming period the improvement of the infrastructure and institution network in pre-university education, higher education and student residence halls/canteens. The two measures related to this objective are: improving the infrastructure of education institutions and student residence halls/canteens in pre-university education (1.9.1); further improving the network of education institutions and adult education organisers (1.9.2) and improving the infrastructure of higher education institutions and student residence halls/canteens (1.9.3).

Pre-pandemic period

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 is dedicated to improving the education of the population through ten targets monitored based on 12 indicators. The Republic of Serbia regularly reports progress on five targets, based on six indicators[11]. The following are the latest data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2022):

- SDG 4.1.2 Completion rate – the first cycle of primary education 99.9%, the second cycle of primary education 99.5%, and secondary education 97.7%.

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[7] Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, SILC data, SDG monitoring database
[8] Education Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia until 2030. Government of the Republic of Serbia, June 2021
[9] Education Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia until 2030. Government of the Republic of Serbia, June 2021
[10] Third National Report on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction, Government of the Republic of Serbia (2018) (Treći nacionalni izveštaj o socijalnom uključivanju i smanjenju siromaštva, Vlada Republike Srbije (2018))
[11] Report on progress towards the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals in the Republic of Serbia – 2021 Report. Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2022) (Izveštaj o napretku u ostvarivanju Ciljeva održivog razvoja do 2030. godine u Republici Srbiji – izveštaj za 2021. godinu. Republički zavod za statistiku (2022))

- SDG 4.1.4 Dropout rate in primary education is 0.4, and 0.8 in secondary education.

- SDG 4.2.2 Participation rate in organised learning (one year before the official primary entry age) 96.4%.

- SDG 4.2.4 Participation rate in preschool education 63%.

- SDG 4.3.1 Participation rate of youth and adults in formal and non-formal education and training in the previous 12 months for the 15-24 age group is 66.9%, while for the 24-64 age group the participation rate is 3.7%.

The achievements of students from the Republic of Serbia in PISA 2018 testing were below the OECD average. The curriculum reform was initiated in 2018 in accordance with the OECD recommendations. The new Strategy also foresees the monitoring of PISA study conducted every three years (due to COVID-19, the PISA 2021 was postponed until 2022), so, based on the PISA 2028, it will be possible to analyse the achievements of 15-year-olds whose entire education has been based on the new reformed curricula.

At the level of preschool education (PSE), despite various activities and progress made, there is still a participation gap in various age group of children, as well as a lack of capacity of institutions to enrol all children, despite a significant increase in capacities of preschool institutions (PSIs) and increased number of facilities. The analysis of the current state of play also noted the underdeveloped awareness of citizens about the education role of PSE, since it is still perceived more as a "baby-sitting system" than as part of the Serbia's education system.[12]

In the context of equity, two negative phenomena remain: the gaps between local self-governments (LSGs) in terms of the participation of children in general and participation of children from Roma settlements in Serbia (predominantly excluded from PSE), as well as children with disabilities, children from the poorest families and children from rural areas. The analysis of all the measures currently implemented in PSE indicates that their successful implementation can significantly contribute to further PSE development.

Compared to other countries in the region and the EU average, Serbia spends a relatively modest portion of its public resources on education (including all levels). In 2018, the last year for which full data was available, Serbia spent 3.7% of GDP on education, compared to 4.7% in EU27 and compared to 4.5% in Serbia in 2009, according to the *Building Human Capital for Long-term Prosperity* report *(*World Bank, UNICEF 2022). Compared to total public spending, Serbia also spends slightly below the EU27 average, at 9.3% and 9.9%, respectively. Public funding of tertiary education in Serbia is also decreasing and now accounts for 0.55% of GDP, relative to 0.66% in 2014. On a relative per-student basis, Serbia's spending is close to the EU average, although it is in absolute terms less than a fifth of the EU average.

The *Building Human Capital for Long-term Prosperity* report states that at the level of primary and secondary education, inefficiency has increased, with higher per-student spending and lower student/teacher ratio. Budget spending per student for primary and secondary education was approximately 16% of GDP per capita in 2015, but increased to around 18% of GDP per capita in 2019. During that period, the number of students decreased faster than the number of classes, schools, and in particular teachers. However, children in Serbia have about four school weeks less time to learn than an average child in the EU, indicating a loss of efficiency even with more available resources (teachers).[13]

Of the total public expenditure on education, the majority is spent at the central level, or 71.7% of expenditure, 27.9% at the local self-government level, and only 0.4% at the level of AP Vojvodina.

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[12] Education Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia until 2030. Government of the Republic of Serbia, June 2021
[13] Building Human Capital for Long-term Prosperity (World Bank, UNICEF. 2022)

Observed by the level of education in the Republic of Serbia, 16.4% of total education expenditure is allocated to preschool education, 43.2% to primary education, 18.8% to secondary education and 14.5% to higher education, as stated by the Serbian Government in the *Third National Report on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction in the Republic of Serbia* (2018).

Pandemic period (2020-2021)

In 2020, the world experienced a challenge unprecedented in recent history – a health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Major and substantial changes occurred at almost all levels of the functioning of society.

Different distance learning modalities were introduced, and it remains to be assessed how this transformation will affect the functional literacy of children in the future. However, experts also anticipate some positive impacts as well, such as the possibility of increasing digital literacy, reducing digital divide and improving teachers' digital skills.

In May 2020, the MESTD, in cooperation with UNICEF and the Institute of Psychology, conducted the monitoring of the manner of participation and learning processes of students from vulnerable groups during distance teaching and learning[14]. The majority of students in the Republic of Serbia, according to school reports, participated in distance teaching, which included watching pre-recorded classes aired by the public broadcaster RTS, TV classes, and using the online learning platform, as well as using alternative forms of distance teaching. Some of the above-mentioned forms of distance teaching covered 99% of students and 93% of students in schools for the education of students with disabilities. The participation of students belonging to vulnerable social groups, however, fell short of these percentages. For example, in primary schools, 83% of students belonging the Roma ethnic minority who need additional support in education participated in distance teaching, with 56% of these students following classes broadcast on RTS or online classes, and 27% receiving alternative forms of support, while 17% of the students did not participate in classes in any way.[15]

In order to contribute to a thorough examination of the effects of the pandemic on families with children aged 0 to 17 years in Serbia, UNICEF conducted a longitudinal survey of such families living in the territory of Serbia from 2020 to 2021.[16] The first wave of the survey was conducted in April 2020, the second wave in July 2020 and the third and last wave in March 2021.

Education indicators suggest that online teaching caused problems in education due to a lack of working atmosphere at home, changeable mood of the child and changeable possibilities for following classes. Educated mothers/caregivers, who found it the hardest to meet all parenting requirements, were the least satisfied with online classes. Households in the urban areas of Serbia reported more often that they were not satisfied with online teaching and that they were concerned how this type of teaching would affect future education of their children.

Younger children in preschool institutions have somewhat specific requirements, so challenges in the pandemic were specific as well: children in rural areas were the least likely to return to preschool

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[14] Monitoring the Manner of Participation and Learning Process of Students from Vulnerable Groups During Distance Learning – an Integral Report Based on Survey Findings. Institute of Psychology, MESTD, UNICEF. 2020) (Praćenje načina učešća i procesa učenja učenika iz osetljivih grupa tokom ostvarivanja obrazovno-vaspitnog rada učenjem na daljinu – integralni izveštaj na osnovu istraživačkih nalaza. Institut za psihologiju, MPNTR, UNICEF. 2020))

[15] Monitoring the Manner of Participation and Learning Process of Students from Vulnerable Groups During Distance Learning – an Integral Report Based on Survey Findings. Institute of Psychology, MESTD, UNICEF. 2020) (Praćenje načina učešća i procesa učenja učenika iz osetljivih grupa tokom ostvarivanja obrazovno-vaspitnog rada učenjem na daljinu – integralni izveštaj na osnovu istraživačkih nalaza. Institut za psihologiju, MPNTR, UNICEF. 2020))

[16] UNLCEF 2021 Research on Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Families with Children in Serbia https://www.unicef.org/serbia/media/18646/file/EN%20-%20UNICEF%20COVID-19%20report.pdf

institutions after the state of emergency was lifted, which may negatively affect their socialisation in the future.

Most parents believe that the epidemiological situation did not affect the quality of work in preschool institutions (57%). Communication with teachers was assessed as useful (84%) in both survey cycles. Most parents of children aged 7–17 (66%) estimate that distance learning negatively affected the child's motivation to learn. In addition to decreased motivation, most parents (58%) feel that distance learning had a negative impact on the quality of the child's learning. The most frequently cited issues with distance teaching are the child's mood (19%), lack of working atmosphere at home (18%) and teacher's high expectations and requests (14%).

Parents of children aged 7 to 17 did not generally perceive any improvement in distance teaching compared to the first period of the pandemic: 48% believe that nothing changed, while 39% believe that this form of teaching was later better organised. Blended teaching did not reduce the assistance parents and family members provided to the child when learning: 32% of parents say they continued to help the child, while 31% did not help the child before, nor did the blended teaching change that. Parental assistance in at least one survey cycle was registered in 70% of households with children aged 7 to 12 and 40% of households with children aged 13 to 17.

The pandemic did not increase the percentage of children who have private classes besides regular schooling: 22% of children aged 7 to 17 attended private classes. In their spare time, children often had various activities, including being outdoors (68%) and the use of digital devices (18%), while 14% almost always spent time using these devices. As expected, the use of digital devices was more widespread among children aged 13 to 17.

Most parents (60%) feel that education during the pandemic will have a negative impact on their children's further education.

Key findings of consultations

In the period from April to June 2022, data was collected through an online questionnaire (academia, CSOs, parent associations, youth (U-Report), teachers) and focus groups (youth). In agreement with the representatives of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, the new *Education Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia until 2030*, adopted in June 2021, was used as the proposal of the Ministry for the consultation process. The results of the consultation process per target group are listed below.

Academia

71 persons participated in the consultations with academia.

59.2% of the participants from academia feel that digital resources should be used frequently in the education process, 26.8% feel that they should be used periodically, while 14.1% feel that they should be used at all times.

Nearly three quarters (74.6%) of the participants in the consultations from academia believe that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant losses in students' achievements, 22.5% believe that the losses are minor, while only 2.8% believe that the pandemic has not left any impact on students' achievements.

As many as 70% of the participants from academia surveyed believe that distance learning had a negative impact on students' mental health, while 32.9% think there was no impact. Only 1.4% of respondents perceive the impact of distance learning on students' mental health as positive.

When asked about innovation in education during the COVID-19 pandemic that positively affected the improvement of the quality and inclusiveness of education, the representatives of academia responded as follows:

o   The use of digital resources and online classes are the two most common answers given. In addition, the creative methods used by teachers to evaluate students' knowledge were also innovative (using online quizzes and similar activities).

o   Part of academia perceives the fact that online teaching enabled certain groups of students to adapt classes to the schedules of their other activities as a strength of online teaching. This proved to be a particularly important support for working students, students in parent roles or who are ill.

o   Digitalisation of teaching materials made literature accessible to all students. Recording and uploading lectures on portals, always accessible to students, made learning easier for many students. The introduction of distance classes allowed greater accessibility for students from other parts of the country who did not have to pay for accommodation. In this regard, costs were also lower for students who rent accommodation in another city during their studies. Students who suffer from anxiety and have difficulties in social aspects felt better since they were able to stay at home for longer periods of time.

o   The transition to online teaching encouraged teachers to learn about online context, resulting in the improvement of digital competencies of teachers and a broader range of tools that teachers have at their disposal and can adjust to differences among students. In this respect, the diversity of teaching resources used increased.

o   The use of the online platform allowed both students and teachers to become better informed about their functioning and to start using these tools, but the objection raised was that this was mostly done *ad-hoc* and without adequate systemic support from universities and colleges since

the beginning of the pandemic (in terms of collective training, etc.). Increasing capacities for online teaching should remain a priority in order to use the potential of this change and translate it into higher quality education.

o Some of the participants in academic consultations believe that another improvement during the COVID-19 pandemic was related to the fact that the contact among students, teachers and associates via online applications was more frequent than in the regular environment and the flow of information faster owing to online work.

o Two participants stressed that no innovation during the COVID-19 pandemic had a positive impact on improving the quality and inclusiveness of education. One of the consultation participants stated that longer sleep was a positive change.

As the most important priorities for achieving quality and inclusive education, the representatives of academia cite the following:

26.8%	Raising the competencies of teaching staff (including ICT competencies)
22.5%	Connecting the education sector with the labour market (enhancing the practical experience of students)
16.9%	Investing in scientific research capacities of teaching staff and students
16.9%	Infrastructure improvement (teaching premises, information systems, computer and laboratory/specialised classroom equipment, server equipment)
9.9%	Providing access to education institutions (schools/colleges) by removing architectural, communication and all other barriers for students with disabilities
7%	Investing in the mobility of teaching staff and students

In addition to the above mentioned, the representatives of academia also cite the following priorities as relevant for improving quality and inclusive education:

o A significant investment in education at all levels, from primary schools to higher education, in both students and teachers, as well as in education institution infrastructure, in particular libraries and online libraries. There is also need for greater investment in the scientific research capacities of teaching staff and students.

o Encouraging learning based on scientific facts that would enable students to understand the phenomena and processes around them and thus be resistant to manipulation, fake news, pseudoscience, and to explore and critically view the world around them.

o Changing teaching methods (interactive teaching and teaching individualisation) and applying knowledge in everyday life and future profession. Raising assessment criteria and stricter punishment of academic impropriety. Fostering interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach to education.

o Promoting mentoring in the teaching process. Reducing the dominance of traditional teaching and transitioning to practices that involve active engagement of students in learning (e.g., project learning) and strengthening the formal role of classroom assessment.

o Strengthening the capacities of teachers at all levels of education for the implementation of modern pedagogical practices. Reducing administrative obligations of all teachers at all levels of education. The teacher is not an administrative worker and needs to devote his/her working hours to teaching, student needs, learning, professional development, scientific work.

- Introducing new study programmes at colleges in line with labour market requirements.

- Enhancing teachers' competencies for working in inclusive education by improving existing teacher training programmes. Increasing resource availability and support to teachers in inclusive education context. Greater involvement of special education teachers, as needed, in the design and implementation of the teaching process.

- Introducing mandatory psychological counselling for education staff and students, greater care for their mental health by the education system. Greater flexibility of the education system for poor students and working students.

- Professionalisation of higher education institution management and the work discipline of academic staff. Reducing the scope of teaching curricula and classic approach in order to leave more time for in-depth, research-based and creative learning.

- Providing funding to encourage the best students to stay on at their colleges. "The ability to get an appropriate job though fair and well-deserved efforts is the only basis for quality education."

- Encouraging student mobility at all levels of studies and introducing mandatory mobility window into all study programmes.

- Introducing paid internships during studies (after internship became a compulsory part of undergraduate and master study curricula).

Civil society organisations

10 civil society organisations participated in the consultations.

90% of civil society organisations (CSOs) believe that the COVID-19 pandemic caused losses in students' achievements. In addition, all representatives of civil society organisations participating in the TES consultations feel that distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on students' mental health.

As the most important priorities for achieving quality and inclusive education, civil society organisations cite the following:

40%	Raising the competencies of teaching staff (including ICT competencies)
30%	Building students' competencies required for easier and faster integration in the modern labour market (including practical experience)
20%	Providing access to education institutions (preschool institutions/schools) by removing architectural, communication and all other barriers for students with disabilities
10%	Infrastructure improvement (teaching premises, information systems, computer and laboratory/specialised classroom equipment, server equipment)

In addition to the above mentioned, CSOs also cite the following priorities as relevant for improving quality and inclusive education:

- Changing the value system in the education system and placing students in the focus of the education system.

- Developing higher-order cognitive learning – based on understanding, analysis, connection, interdisciplinary and thematic connection. Encouraging students' critical thinking by changing curricula, building teachers' capacities and changing approaches in working with students.

- Developing inclusive culture and advocating for the right to quality education and social inclusion for all children. Improving support for the implementation of inclusive education at the local community and school level. Implementing different activities that lead to a change of attitudes and broader/better public awareness (of the education community and general public) of inclusive education.

- Providing adequate additional support to students and teachers and establishing cooperation between different actors at the local and national level. Increasing the accountability of the individual and the entire education system for the achievement of education outcomes.

When asked about the ways in which CSOs can contribute to achieving identified priorities, their representatives responded as follows:

- Provision of support to education institutions with regard to the inclusion of all students and achievement of quality inclusive education for all children.

- Cooperation on capacity building and linking education institutions and other actors (especially students' parents, but also communities at large) with the aim of improving education outcomes.

- CSOs can provide support to the education system at the local level, monitor and report on discrimination cases.

- The inclusion of CSOs in some aspects of education reform, depending on the capacities of organisations and the specificities of reforms.

- Participation in the planning and implementation of the measures envisaged by the Education Development Strategy.

Parents

8 parent organisations participated in the consultations.

All parent organisations believe that distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic caused significant losses in student achievements and had a negative impact on students' mental health.

As the most important priorities for achieving quality and inclusive education, parent organisations cite the following:

50%	Building students' competencies required for easier and faster integration in the modern labour market (including practical experience).
25%	Providing access to education institutions (preschool institutions/schools) by removing architectural, communication and all other barriers for students with disabilities.
25 %	Raising the competencies of teaching staff (including ICT competencies).

In addition to the above mentioned, parents also cite the following priorities as relevant for improving quality and inclusive education:

- Higher budget funding for additional education support.

- Providing long-term financial and non-financial support to the inclusive education process at all levels and to all actors. Achieving quality education accessible to every student in accordance *with the Convention on the Rights* of the Child. Establishing resource centres for support to inclusive education.

o   Improving general competencies and infrastructure, especially in underdeveloped, rural municipalities and local self-governments. Developing students' soft skills.

o   More attention to the introduction of education in the field of environmental protection.

When asked about innovation in education during the COVID-19 pandemic that positively affected the improvement of the quality and inclusiveness of education, parents responded as follows:

o   "Distance learning has become acceptable for all – teachers have mastered the process of preparing, conducting classes, assessing knowledge... This is beneficial for everyone, especially for children who have to stay at home for various reasons, including children with disabilities."

o   Introducing new technologies into teaching and use of a large number of digital tools by teachers and children. "This has had a positive impact in developed communities, but, at the same time, it was an aggravating circumstance where innovation was not accessible and could not technically take root. Provision of free internet and devices to students from vulnerable groups by CSOs, had a very positive influence on the quality of education during the pandemic".

Teaching staff

109 representatives of teaching staff participated in the consultations on the transformation of education. The share of primary school class teachers (ISCED 1) was 62.4%, the share of subject teachers in primary education (ISCED 2) was 19.3% and the share of secondary school teachers was 27.5%. No teaching staff from preschool education was involved in the consultations (ISCED 0).

As for the teachers, as many as 61.5% believe that digital resources should often be used in education. 11% believe that new technologies should always be present, while 29.4% believe that they should only be used sometimes. No teacher supported the complete absence of digital technologies.

As for teachers' opinions on the alignment of the current curriculum with learning outcomes, as many as 73.4% believe that the existing curriculum and defined outcomes are fairly aligned. Just over a fifth of the respondents believe that the alignment is weak, while 8.3% believe the outcomes are fully aligned with the curriculum. No teacher supported the claim that there was no alignment.

In the opinion of 54.1% of teachers, the currently implemented curriculum enables to a significant extent the acquisition of skills needed for the 21st century, while 8.2% believe that the current curriculum fully enables the acquisition of skills needed for the 21st century. In addition, 36.7% believe that the current curriculum does not enable much acquisition of skills, while 1.8% of teachers feel that the current curriculum does not enable any acquisition of skills needed for the 21st century.

As the most important priorities for achieving quality and inclusive education, the teaching staff representatives cite the following:

29.2%	Raising the competencies of teaching staff (including ICT competencies).
24.8%	Building the competencies of students needed for easier and faster integration in the modern labour market (including practical experience).
23%	Infrastructure improvement (teaching premises, information systems, computer and laboratory/specialised classroom equipment, server equipment).
16.8%	Connecting the education sector with the labour market (enhancing the practical experience of students).
6.2%	Enabling access to education institutions (preschool institutions/schools) by removing architectural, communication and all other barriers for students with disabilities.

In addition to these priorities, teachers also mention the following relevant strategic directions that can contribute to the creation of quality and inclusive education:

o Improving initial education of preschool and school teachers and raising the competencies of teaching staff, with the modernisation of the practise and methods of their work (numerous comments). Raising the competencies of all decision-makers in education.

o Improving the motivation of education staff, primarily through better funding (numerous comments).

o Further developing online teaching and improving teachers' ICT competencies.

o Simplifying curricula, developing skills for the 21st century and developing practical and functional knowledge among students (numerous comments).

o Improving the student assessment system.

o Increasing the accessibility of non-formal education.

o Providing additional support of expert associates in teaching, increasing the number and improving the work of other professionals working with students: pedagogists, psychologists, speech therapists, special educators, pedagogical assistants. In addition, numerous comments were related to the mandatory employment of special education teachers and speech therapists in each school.

o Reducing the number of students in a class (numerous comments). Reducing the number of students in classes attended by students as part of the inclusive education programme to 10–15.

o Sensitising children, youth, teachers and adults in general to the problems of persons and children with disabilities, defining and adopting the principles of tolerance, empathy and cooperation. Developing empathy with inclusive education, increasing teachers' knowledge about anti-discrimination and promoting inclusive education in society and schools.

o Accessibility of assistive technologies for more effective inclusive education. Implementation of training on modern learning methods in inclusive teaching.

o Establishing closer cooperation with special schools for children with disabilities.

o Improving cooperation with students' parents or caregivers in order to improve the quality of inclusive education.

o Increasing support to teaching staff through coordinated joint activities of the government and non-governmental sector.

o Encouraging mutual learning among schools, fostering exchange, networking and interaction with other schools.

o One comment was related to the need for mandatory teacher training for working with students with disabilities. "Inclusion has been introduced without consulting teachers who do not know how to approach and work with children with disabilities or aggressive behaviour towards other children."

When asked about innovation in education during the COVID- 19 pandemic which positively influenced the improvement of education quality and inclusiveness, teachers responded as follows:

o More intensive use of digital technologies and digitalisation in every aspect of education ("everyone became digitally literate"): online teaching, using IT in teaching and developing the skills of communication and distance learning, contact with students through mobile phones, exchange among teachers and students via numerous platforms in use (Google classroom, Moodle, Zoom, MS Teams, etc.).

o   Hybrid classes are a good model for reflecting on future forms of education.

o   Online teaching has provided more individual access to the teaching process. Modernisation of the work method and smaller groups of students in class (working with half of the class).

o   Recording and accessibility of classes at any time. Uploading teaching materials, material databases, access to materials at all times and according to the student's pace.

o   Teachers have discovered the wealth of possible sources of information, the breadth of media space and the possibilities of technology, and have also learned to use a large number of new programs and applications not previously used in their classes.

o   Professional development has been updated and become more efficient and productive on online platforms.

o   Parents spent more time with their children during the pandemic, because they were forced to help them with their distance classes.

o   "No innovation was good, since neither parents nor students were able to handle distance teaching. They faced difficulties opening Google classrooms and some did not have a computer but only parents' mobile phones".

o   "So far, all innovations have had a negative impact on improving quality. In the past two years, the quality, knowledge and motivation of students have decreased drastically".

Youth

The consultations were also carried out with a number of young people, secondary school and primary school students, where concrete ideas were captured on improving education. The consultations were conducted in two ways: 1) through an online survey using the U-Report platform and 2) by organising a focus group/workshop with upper primary school students.

1) Online survey conducted via the U-Report platform[17]. The survey was conducted during May and June 2022 with the aim of capturing the opinions and positions of young people on various aspects of Serbia's education system. 921 respondents participated in the survey, 68% female, 28% male, and 4% did not provide gender information. The age group of 15 to 19 accounted for 80% of the sample, 16% of the sample belonged to the 20-25 group, 1% to the 26-30 group, and for 2% of the sample, the age is unknown.[18] 4% of respondents attend primary school, 77% attend secondary school (43% grammar school, 34% secondary vocational school), and 20% attend college or post-secondary education. The largest number of respondents are from Southern, Belgrade and Nišava district, while 9% of respondents belong to the category of young people with disabilities.

The following are the key findings of the consultations with young people:

o   The majority of respondents point out that the best form of teaching is the one organised exclusively in the classroom (77%). Only 6% of young people opted for online classes as the most efficient form of teaching, while 16% of young people believe that blended teaching delivers the best results (no major differences in responses between genders). There is a similarity between the views of the respondents attending grammar school and secondary vocational school

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[17] U-Report is a digital social reporting platform created by UNICEF. It is present in more than 90 countries and the global youth community has more than 22,000,000 U-Reporters. The Platform presents the voices of young people and promotes their participation in creating positive social changes. In Serbia, the platform was launched in 2019 in partnership with the Ministry for Youth and Sports. The current community in Serbia has more than 10,000 U-Reporters.

[18] The U-Report findings cover the category of young people aged 15-30 and therefore do not reflect the views of children under 15 who attend primary school.

(preference for class teaching), while young people attending colleges or post-secondary education show more appreciation for blended form of teaching.

Answers	Secondary vocational school	Grammar school	College/post-secondary education
In the classroom	76%	84%	63%
Online	9%	5%	5%
Blended	15%	11%	32%
Total	100%	100%	100%

- o Young people feel that digital resources and platforms should be used in education – 14% believe that they should be used all the time, 40% that they should be used frequently, while 43% emphasise that they should be used occasionally. A higher percentage of male respondents favour the constant use of digital resources and platforms in education (23%) compared to female respondents (10%). During online classes, young people most often communicated with teachers via the Google Classroom education platform, while a somewhat lower percentage of respondents cited the use of the MS Teams and Zoom platform.

- o 66% of respondents face difficulties in absorbing the material during the COVID-19 pandemic. One in ten respondents believes that it is easier to absorb the material than before the pandemic, and one in four argues that there are no changes relative to the pre-pandemic period (no significant gender deviations in the respondents' responses). Difficulties in absorbing the material during the pandemic are somewhat more pronounced among secondary school respondents (70%) than among respondents attending college or post-secondary education (58%).

- o A third of the youth sample (32%) feel that knowledge acquired at school is a poor or very poor preparation for future work. A similar percentage of young people (28%) believe that knowledge from school is a good or very good preparation for future work. 40% of young people give the level of learning in school for the future labour market a rating 3 out of 5.

- o Young people propose introducing regular internships in the education system so that they would have an opportunity to apply in practice the knowledge acquired at school, they state that it is necessary to work on improving communication between teachers/professors and students and that reducing the material should be considered.

2) Focus group was organised with 19 students (9 boys and 10 girls) from the sixth to eighth grade of primary school (12–15-year-olds). The focus group was organised on 7 June 2022 at the Nikola Tesla primary school in Vinca. A representative sample of school students was created, with equal numbers of students with different levels of school achievement, including students educated based on individual education plans IEP1 and IEP2, the numbers of students from different ethnic groups, and the numbers of students with different socio-economic backgrounds. A special focus was on their experience over the past two years and online learning. Further focus was on returning to schools, and recommendations for improving education and their school life were subsequently defined.

Below are the key positions and proposals of primary school students regarding the transformation of education:

- o All participants agreed that they had a hard time with online classes because they were denied direct contact with their peers, as well as learning in a larger group of peers. It was also noted that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, extracurricular activities and additional school clubs were

reduced or non-existent and need to be reintroduced, as well as outdoor classes, events related to subjects taught at school (e.g. visits to museums, natural reserves/beauty spots, cultural events, etc.).

o More investment is needed in children and young people through education. This students' recommendation partly refers to the improvement of school infrastructure (higher-quality accessible buildings and classrooms, school canteens), but even more to the quality of classes, greater accessibility of education to all children in line with the time in which we live, more interactivity and practical classes, more elective courses, more extracurricular activities in order to improve the quality of life and education at school.

o Students expect the school to involve them more in its life by asking for their opinion and allowing them to participate in the design and adoption of decisions on school improvement, better organisation of classes in specialised classrooms and coordination amongst teachers so that students do not get overburdened, organisation of extracurricular activities, and everything related to their life at school where they spend a lot of time.

o The students pointed out that they did not have equal access to education during online classes - some students did not have the internet that was good enough to follow classes, some did not have an adequate device and so on. Special attention should be paid to these comments if online instruction is organised again.

o The students praised the efforts of some teachers who had a different approach to the organisation of classes and who used both computers and presentations for teaching a class. Students feel that the technical equipment available at the school is insufficient.

o The school is a place where students should feel safe and it should pay more attention to the students' safety.

Institutions – ministry in charge of education

In accordance *with the Education Development Strategy in the Republic of Serbia until 2030*[19], **the vision of education development** is to ensure quality education so that the full potential of the population could be reached, especially of every child and young person in the Republic of Serbia, while **the mission of education** is to ensure high-quality education in the service of the development of the individual and, thus, society at large.

Providing systemic support to students along their education trajectory is a priority of the MESTD, with an emphasis on those from disadvantaged backgrounds and vulnerable social groups. This will only be possible if intersectoral cooperation is strengthened, mechanisms to support students improved and human capacities in education institutions and other relevant institutions strengthened.

In response to the vision and mission of education in the Republic of Serbia, *the Strategy* defines two goals and several objectives.

Goal 1: Increased quality of teaching and learning, equity and accessibility of pre-university education and enhanced pedagogical function of education institutions.

Objective 1.1: Improved teaching and learning in pre-university education

More specifically, pre-university education should be conducted based on quality outcome-based curricula leading to the development of students' competencies determined by national qualification standards. Education institutions have an important public and cultural function, and it is necessary

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[19] "Official Gazette of RS", no. 63 of 23 June 2021.

to reaffirm and strengthen their pedagogical role. Achieving this objective entails conducting activities related to measures designed to develop new and improve the existing qualification standards and achievement standards, curricula, creating conditions and supporting education institutions in improving teaching and learning and supporting education institutions in strengthening the pedagogical function.

Objective 1.2: Improved quality assurance system in pre-university education

Priority areas for quality assurance in pre-university education include empowering teachers in general, supporting teachers to improve assessment at school, making it conducive to students' further progress.

Objective 1.3: Foundations for the development of digital education at the pre-university level in place

Digital education is a term that relates to two different but complementary areas of education policy - one includes measures aimed at the digital competencies of teachers and students, while the other includes the pedagogical application of digital technologies for the purpose of improving the quality of teaching and learning.

In order to achieve this objective, activities under the following measures need to be implemented: development of digital education; development and implementation of the Integrated Education Information System (JISP) and data-based decision-making.

Objective 1.4: Improved accessibility, equity and openness of pre-university education

Measures leading to the achievement of this aim include establishing new and improving the existing mechanisms for supporting education institutions in achieving openness, equity and accessibility; fostering interculturalism in education.

In order for the education system to be accessible, equitable and open, it is of crucial importance to establish new and improve the existing support mechanisms with a specific focus on the specificities of different vulnerable groups (students from families of low socio-economic status, children with disabilities, Roma population and, among them, especially girls, etc.).

Objective 1.5: Improved quality of initial education of preschool and school teachers

This objective will be achieved by applying two measures - improving the quality of study programmes for initial education of preschool and school teachers; improving the concept of traineeship and teacher induction.

Objective 1.6: Improved quality of the system of permanent professional development of preschool and school teachers and expert associates

Measures leading to the achievement of this objective include improving the system of permanent professional development of preschool and school teachers and expert associates and developing a career advancement system for education staff; developing a system of permanent professional development of principals/directors and secretaries of institutions.

Objective 1.7: Improved attitude towards the Serbian language and literature as the basic elements of national and cultural identity and improving education in the Serbian language in the diaspora

Achieving this objective entails implementing measures related to establishing cooperation mechanisms and supporting the promotion of the Serbian language and literature; improving the quality of instruction in the Serbian language abroad.

Objective 1.8: Improved conditions for lifelong learning

Foreseen measures leading to the achievement of this objective include the development of a system of recognition of prior learning, transparency and comparability of the qualification systems; fostering dialogue and developing social partnership; establishing regional training centres.

Objective 1.9: Improved infrastructure and network of institutions in pre-university education and student residence halls/canteens

Measures related to this objective include improving the infrastructure of education institutions and student residence halls/canteens in pre-university education and further improving the network of education institutions and adult education organisers.

Goal 2: Increased quality and improved relevance and equity of higher education.

Objective 2.1: Improved quality of supply, human resources and outcomes of higher education

This objective is realised through the measures that include the development of the HE Quality Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (quality indicators) and implementation of the results obtained in the formulation of the HE policy; development and implementation of the funding model that promotes the HE quality, efficiency and successfulness of studies; development, establishment and implementation of comprehensive processes and procedures related to the improvement of human resources in higher education.

Objective 2.2: Improved relevance of higher education at the national and international level

In order to achieve this objective, the activities that need to be implemented under the measures include fostering cooperation between HEIs with employers, the business and public sector and strengthening the entrepreneurial component of higher education; supporting the internationalisation of higher education.

Objective 2.3: Improved participation in and equity of higher education

Increasing the participation in and equity of education will be achieved by implementing the following measures: improving the accessibility of and support to successfulness of studies; supporting HEIs in achieving permanent lifelong education.

Objective 2.4: Digitalisation of higher education

The achievement of this goal is planned through the following measures: the introduction of digital platforms, electronic student's log book and electronic student register; the development of a competency register and a qualification register.

Identifying priority measures through four core components

1: Recovery from consequences of interrupted education during the COVID-19 pandemic

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic shows that the education system was able to adapt quickly to dramatic sudden changes. Although the complete school closure lasted for only three months in 2020, during the 2020-21 and 2021/22 school year, classes were held depending on the current pandemic situation, especially in the second cycle of primary school and in secondary school, so regular school classes were on several occasions replaced by blended classes in combination with distance teaching. During the school closure, the Ministry of Education managed to ensure almost

universal participation in continuous education through impressive adaptation to distance teaching and learning (TV classes[20], use of online platforms, IT tools and solutions).

Households in Serbia differ in terms of internet access or computers, which is most often dependent on socio-economic features. Children from vulnerable families found it more difficult to adapt to changes in the way schools work, aggravating existing inequalities.

The COVID-19 pandemic created significant challenges and losses in student achievement, which was confirmed by all actors (75% of academia, 90% of civil society organisations, 100% of parent organisations). The U-report shows that 66% of young respondents (as many as 70% of secondary school students) experienced difficulties in absorbing the material due to attending education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, all the primary school students who participated in the TES consultations agree that online work was difficult for them because they were deprived of direct contact with peers and learning in a larger group. Also, all actors consider that distance learning during COVID-19 had a negative impact on students' mental health (70% of academia, 100% of civil society organisations and 100% of parent associations consulted).

At the same time, the consultations showed that online teaching made some positive changes in education that could be seen as an opportunity in the future to create quality and inclusive education. Teachers have learned to use innovative creative learning tools, learned about the wealth of available sources of information, the scope of media space and technological opportunities, and also mastered the use of a large number of new programs and applications that are now used in teaching. Online work often enabled more contacts between teachers and students. In addition, online teaching enabled certain groups of students to better adapt classes to the schedule of their other activities (such as parenting, work, health challenges). Digitalisation of teaching material made literature available to all students. Recording lectures and uploading them on portals, constantly accessible to students, made it easier for many students to learn. The use of a large number of digital tools by teachers and children has had a positive impact in developed areas.

At the same time, the participation of students from vulnerable groups in online learning was insufficient, according to the Building Human Capital report (World Bank, UNICEF 2022): 17% of Roma students in primary schools were unable to access distance learning due to the lack of internet, lack of digital devices and poor digital literacy among teachers and parents. One in four students had some or several problems adjusting to distance learning. These difficulties were not unique to Serbia, but triggered the need for further support in education after COVID-19. Providing free internet and devices to vulnerable students, based on the assistance of donors, CSOs or institutions, had a very positive impact on access to and quality of education during the pandemic.

Despite confirmed challenges with online learning during the pandemic, a vast majority of the consultation participants argue that digital tools should be used more often or always in the education process (73.3% of academia, 72.5% of the teaching staff, 44% of the youth) and that hybrid teaching is a good model to consider in the context of future forms of education. This is in line with Objective 1.3 of the Education Development Strategy: Foundations for the development of digital education at the pre-university level in place, as well as with Objective 2.4: Digitalisation of higher education.

2: Identification of the main strategic directions (lever packages) for designing education for the 21st century and acceleration of progress towards common education goals and objectives

Increasing teaching staff competencies, including ICT competencies, was identified as a priority

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[20] By airing specially prepared and adapted education content for students by the Serbian Public Broadcaster, creating a repository of educational video content for primary and secondary school students on the free application RTS My School, on the RTS website and on the media internet platform RTS Planet, by making available a set of tools for online communication between students and teachers.

policy during the TES consultations (27% of academic community respondents, 40% CSOs, 25% of parent associations, 28% of teachers). Teachers' competencies continuously need to be raised and capacities built for the implementation of modern pedagogical practices including the implementation of digital technologies. Capacity building for online teaching should remain a priority in order to take advantage of the potential of this change and turn it into a higher quality of education. Support for distance learning principles should be systematic (continuous), rather than short-term.

Improving initial education of preschool and school teachers and raising the competencies of teaching staff, in parallel with the modernisation of the practices and methods of their work – interactive teaching, individualisation of teaching, application of knowledge in everyday life and future profession, improving the system of student assessment. In addition, the administrative burden on teachers should be reduced in order to provide sufficient time for teaching, learning, working with students, mentoring, etc.

Investment in mobility of teaching staff and students was also highlighted as a priority during the TES consultations (7% of academia respondents). Teachers cite the need for greater support to teaching staff through coordinated joint efforts of the government and non-governmental sector and fostering mutual learning among schools, fostering networking and interacting with other schools.

These recommendations from the consultation process are in line with Objective 1.5 of the Education Development Strategy: Improving the quality of initial education of preschool and school teachers, Objective 1.6: Improving the quality of systems for permanent professional development of preschool and school teachers and expert associates.

Support for further development of inclusive education requires special attention in the implementation of SDG 4. The Strategy reiterates that "the introduction of inclusive education requires changes at the national, local and institutional level, including a reform of education funding and management" and that "the system lacks adequate mechanisms for funding and inclusive education funding". The TES consultations proposed the following support for inclusive education: 1) improvement of existing teacher training programmes for inclusive education and improvement of teachers' competencies for inclusive education; 2) increase in the number and improvement of the work of expert associates in the education sector, working with students: pedagogists, psychologists, speech therapists, special education teachers, pedagogical assistants; 3) improvement of the accessibility of assistive technologies for more efficient inclusive education; 4) increase in the accessibility of resources and support networks for teachers working in inclusive education, including co-operation with CSOs and parents; 5) sensitisation of students, teachers, parents and general populations to benefits and challenges of inclusive education and anti-discrimination policy. The Education Development Strategy confirms recommendations from the TES consultations that the provision of systemic support to students during their education journey should remain a priority, with an emphasis on those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and vulnerable social groups.

Linking the education sector with the labour market is also highlighted as a priority policy during the consultations (22% of academia, 30% of CSOs, 50% of parent associations, 41% of teachers). During the TES consultations, a third of youth respondents (32%) stated that knowledge acquired in school is a poor or very poor preparation for future work. It is necessary to simplify curricula, develop skills for the 21st century, introduce regular internships in the education system and develop practical and functional knowledge. This will encourage critical thinking, understanding, analysis, interdisciplinarity and thematic connections among students. These recommendations from the consultation process are in line with Objective 1.1 of the Education Development Strategy: Improved teaching and learning in pre-university education, Objective 1.2: Improved quality assurance system in pre-university education, as well as Objective 2.1: Improved quality of higher education supply,

human resources and outcomes.

Improving education infrastructure (curricula, information systems, computer and laboratory/specialised classroom equipment, servers) including improved access to education infrastructure (removal of architectural, communication and all other barriers for students with disabilities) was highlighted as a policy priority during the TES consultations (27% academia, 30% of CSOs, 25% of parent associations, 30% of teachers). The consultation process also highlighted the importance of reducing the number of students in classes in order to increase education quality. These recommendations from the consultation process are in line with Objective 1.4 of the Education Development Strategy: Improved accessibility, equity and openness of pre-university education, Objective 1.9: Improved infrastructure and networks of institutions in pre-university education, higher education institutions and student residence halls/canteens, as well as Objective 2.3: Improved participation in and equity of higher education.

3: Ambitions to promote education goals

The Education Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia until 2030 and the TES consultation process with key stakeholders confirm the key ideas for future development of education in Serbia, both in line with SDG 4. In this regard, Serbia's ambition remains to meet the SDGs by 2030.

The vision for education development is to ensure quality education so that the full potential of every child, young person and adult in the Republic of Serbia can be achieved. The education mission is to provide high-quality education in the service of the development of the individual, but also of society at large.

Two main goals of the education strategy in Serbia are: Goal 1: Increasing the quality of teaching and learning, equity and accessibility of pre-university education and strengthening the education function of education institutions; and Goal 2: Increased accessibility, quality, relevance and equity of higher education.

Future development of education in Serbia also entails strengthening an intersectoral approach and establishing mechanisms at the national and local level for coordinated implementation of policies and measures that directly or indirectly concern education – establishing an intersectoral approach and closer links between education and other sectors such as social protection and employment, youth, economy, culture, finance, etc.

In order to realise this vision, a culture of lifelong learning, transformation of learning and teaching towards the development of critical thinking, media and information literacy, education in line with scientific, technical and technological achievements, sustainable development and participation in all levels of the education process, should be developed. Providing systemic support to students during their education journey is a national priority, with an emphasis on students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds and vulnerable social groups.

Students expect the school to involve them more in school life, by asking for their opinion and allowing them to participate in the design and adoption of decisions related to the organisation of school, improvement of teaching organisation and co-ordination among teachers in order to avoid overburdening students, and to facilitate the organisation of extracurricular activities, as well as everything related to their life at school where they spend a lot of time.

The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia will continue to report on the Agenda 2030 indicators, including the indicators for Sustainable Development Goal 4.

4: Ensuring sustainable public funding of education

As previously mentioned, Serbia spends a relatively modest portion of its public resources on education. In 2018, the last year for which full data was available, Serbia spent 3.7% of GDP on education, compared to 4.7% in EU27 and to 4.5% in Serbia in 2009, according to the *Building Human Capital for Long-term Prosperity* report (World Bank, UNICEF 2022). Compared to total public spending, Serbia also spends slightly below the EU27 average, at 9.3% and 9.9%, respectively. Public funding for tertiary education in Serbia is also decreasing and now accounts for 0.55% of GDP, relative to 0.66% in 2014. On a relative per-student basis, Serbia's spending close to the EU average, although it is in absolute terms less than a fifth of the EU average. Serbia's spending on education is close to the United Nations benchmark of at least 4.6% of GDP in order to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (SDG 4).

The Education Development Strategy in Serbia proposes "providing adequate funding and flexible funding model for targeted measures related to increasing efficiency, effectiveness and equity in education, including the models of intersectoral funding of integrated services of additional support for children."

Changing human development policies requires more investment in reforms that increase access to early childhood education (especially for the most vulnerable), overall quality of primary and secondary education, updating curricula in order to focus on transversal modern skills (i.e., digital and socio-emotional skills) and increasing the capacity of schools in disadvantaged communities. These recommendations from the consultation process are in line with the new Strategy, which points out that "the negative demographic trend and long-term projections point to a reduction in the number of students, and until this is changed, the education system should allocate resources to raising the quality of education rather than just streamlining".

TES consultations in Serbia demonstrate a high degree of consensus among stakeholders on the need for significant investment in education at all levels. According to the consulted students, more investment in education infrastructure (more accessible buildings and specialised classrooms, school canteens) is needed, but even more in the quality of education and teaching, with the provision of interactive and practical teaching, increased number of elective courses, more extracurricular activities for better quality of life and education at school. This includes greater and more coordinated allocation of funding to inclusive education at all levels. Another important aspect involves improving the motivation of education staff, primarily through better funding of teachers.

In order to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, Serbia should increase the allocation for education development to the United Nations benchmark of at least 4.6% of GDP (SDG 4).

Annex

Results of the teaching staff survey:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1nyzM7uN1aFoIPGOsD-g3LM0j0kiaCUsMwZSkmVfgsCU/edit#responses

Results of the civil society organisation survey:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/18TLha3_d_J_gezVgvydnFV-rhmkxtGT_jFEQIkQYuwQ/edit#responses

Results of the survey of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1265EwrxevpN00XL5Tf0p4Bf6O7a4EImFViI0KWnEHk8/edit#responses

Results of the academia survey:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/19OxOU7ri8VR4s3QU0D4A2uw-UndBhAGvIW72MJejul0/edit#responses

Results of parent organisation survey:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/12n0gWm1SjFYyIWSwANP_ASDwPKzPsXNSgT3J-ar7pPc/edit#responses