

Chapter 26: Education and culture

The EU supports cooperation in education and culture through funding programmes and the coordination of Member State policy through the open method of coordination. The EU and the Member States must also prevent discrimination and ensure quality education for children of migrant workers, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Serbia remains at a **good level** of preparation in the area of education and culture. **Some progress** was made on the implementation of last year's recommendations, by consolidating the national qualifications framework (NQF) system and taking some steps to ensure compliance of the quality assurance system in higher education with the recommendations of the European association for quality assurance in higher education (ENQA). The COVID-19 pandemic somewhat disrupted the organisation and quality of instruction on all levels of education. The recommendations for the 2021 report remain largely valid.

In the coming year, Serbia should in particular:

- increase participation in early childhood education and care, in particular of children from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- continue with the operationalisation of the NQF system, with additional focus on the quality and scope of non-formal education;
- ensure full compliance of the policy and institutional framework for quality assurance in higher education with the recommendations of the ENQA.

In the area of **education and training**, mechanisms to monitor the implementation of the new education strategy until 2030 and its action plan have been established. The student population has continued to decrease due to negative demographic trends and emigration. Enrolment and attainment rates in pre-university education remained high. The total coverage of children with pre-school education aged 6 months to 6.5 years in 2020 decreased from 57.4 % to 55.5 % year-on-year, whereas the enrolment rate of mandatory pre-school education decreased from 97.4 % in 2019 to 96.4 % in 2020. Further efforts are needed to achieve equitable pre-school education for the most disadvantaged children, by strengthening governance and expanding the scope and quality of infrastructure and services. In 2021, the rate of early school leavers was 6.3 %, while lifelong learning participation was 4.8 %.

The hybrid education model established during the COVID-19 pandemic is still being in place but only used depending on its incidence. Further efforts are still needed to compensate for learning gaps caused by digital exclusion, in particular among disadvantaged students. The digital transformation of the education system continued. While the development of the education management information system has progressed, it requires further consolidation, including capacity-building of staff to use data for policy-making and monitoring purposes.

The reform of the general secondary education curriculum continued. No significant change is reported in the low take-up of general secondary education of vocational education and training (VET). Serbia should continue modernising and streamlining qualifications standards to improve VET relevance and further develop the national work-based learning model for VET. The institutional, financial and logistical preparations for introducing the final examinations in secondary education should accelerate to ensure their full implementation as of the 2023-2024 school year. There is a wide gap in learning outcomes across VET and general education, with

vocational students having weaker literacy and numeracy skills than their peers in general education. The number of secondary VET graduates that enter higher education continued to increase to 63.6 % in 2020 from 59.7 % in 2019. Serbia remains committed to the Osnabruck Declaration on VET as an enabler of recovery and just digital and green transitions. In October 2021, the Ministry of Education adopted a specific operational plan for the fight against corruption in the field of education under Action Plan for Chapter 23.

Following the adoption of amendments to the law on higher education in June 2021, aimed at facilitating compliance with the European association for quality assurance in higher education (ENQA) recommendations on better governance and quality assurance principles, concrete operational steps are still pending to strengthen the policy and institutional framework for quality assurance in higher education. The Serbian national accreditation body is eligible as of 2022 to re-apply for renewed membership of ENQA, following its suspension in early 2020. The first dual study programmes and modules in higher education with a reinforced work-based component were accredited as of the 2021/22 academic year. The attainment of tertiary level qualifications for persons aged 30-34 (ISCED levels 5-8) remained at 33 % in 2020, still below the EU target of 40 %. The education sector, higher education in particular, remains a vulnerable area for corruption.

The institutional set-up under the national qualifications framework (NQF) should be further strengthened to be fully operational. The pace of adoption of qualification standards is picking up but should further accelerate, with stronger focus on higher education. The system of validation of non-formal and informal learning was piloted and relevant implementing legislation has been adopted, but is yet to be scaled up systematically. Secondary legislation was adopted aimed at facilitating the accreditation and assessment of adult education providers. Efforts to create a more favourable environment for standardising and expanding career guidance and counselling services should be further sustained.

Further progress was made in increasing the participation of disadvantaged students at all levels of education. The implementation of measures to reduce drop-out rates and segregation needs to be strengthened, especially at local level. Following the adoption of relevant legislation and the selection of eligible schools, the set-up of assistive technology resource centres needs to become functional to provide relevant additional support services for inclusive education. It is necessary to remove obstacles to the engagement of teaching assistants for children with disabilities as a new service in the education system. Further efforts are needed to develop teaching materials and empower teachers to build student competences related to gender equality, health, reproductive health, mental health, sexuality education, prevention and response to all forms of gender-based violence, including sexual abuse.

Serbia continued to participate in several international assessments, including the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) in 2021, as well as the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2022. Piloting of Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS) and Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) were conducted in 2022.

Serbia formally re-associated to the Erasmus+ programme, as a third country, for the period 2021-2027. Under the 2021 call for proposals, Serbian institutions are participating in more than 500 projects (decentralised actions) including around 1 900 mobilities of students, staff and pupils. In 2021, Serbia participated in various initiatives such as the Erasmus Days and

European Youth Week. Serbia is successfully implementing the new cycle of the Erasmus+ programme, including the new DiscoverEU component.

In the area of **culture**, the cultural policy of Serbia is implemented in the framework of the 'Strategic priorities for the development of culture of the Republic of Serbia from 2021 to 2025'. The Council for creative industries continued the communication campaign 'Serbia creates'.

The activities of Novi Sad as European Capital of Culture 2022, are being implemented. In December 2021, Novi Sad Capital of Culture was awarded the Melina Mercouri prize. According to the Foundation 'NoviSad 2022', 95% of the cultural projects have European partners, against 13% before.

Serbia is implementing measures under the UNESCO Convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expression and is also member of the Intergovernmental Committee of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. The Law on Gender Equality, adopted in June 2021, foresees provisions to promote gender equality in the field of culture.

Serbia actively participates in the Creative Europe Programme. The Ministry of Culture and Information provides support to domestic cultural entities that succeed in Creative Europe calls. Following the agreement on Serbia's participation in the Creative Europe Programme, the Creative Europe Desk Serbia was established and started operating in June 2022 [NB: Serbia sent formal notification and 3-year action plan to European Commission in June 2022. The formal notification from HQ is expected in September but eligibility of operations is retroactive from June 2022], building on the successful experience from the previous programme.

The new **youth** strategy until 2030 is yet to be adopted. It needs to be followed by an action plan and mechanisms to ensure inclusive monitoring and reporting. The national youth council remains active and involves youth representatives. Youth policy and support mechanisms are unevenly developed at local level and should be further strengthened. The revision and/or preparation of local youth action plans in line with the provisions of the planning system law should be accelerated. The trend of emigrating young and skilled people continued. The unemployment and inactivity rates among young people remain high. The action plan for the implementation of the Youth Guarantee mechanism is yet to be adopted.