DRAFT REPORT

on

Education in South-East Europe: Current situation and Perspective

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I INTRODUCTION

No society can be developed without a proper education system. All SEECP participants are responsible for their education systems, so it is important to note that, in the previous period, significant efforts are made to improve the situation in this area. Cooperation among SEECP participants provides the exchange of best practices, spreading of information on successful methods, as well as guidelines for future reforms in the field of education.

High quality education in South East Europe must be provided in line with program policies which aim to increase the quality and attractiveness of education, but also in line with the developments relating to greater autonomy of schools, the introduction of new financial approaches that require greater responsibility, the diversification of training providers, including private, but also educational trends after the secondary level of education. All these measures make educational systems even more diversified and complex.

Given the fact that SEECP participants are facing similar challenges in the education field, as well as all European Union member states, their goals are compatible. In the forthcoming period, the idea of lifelong learning should be further developed and quality of education at all levels should be further improved, by promoting equality, with special focus on gender based equality and social cohesion, as well as by fostering innovation and creativity. It is necessary to insist on the coherence of policies at all levels - from early, pre-school and school education to higher education, including vocational education and trainings and educations for adults, thus respecting the principle of lifelong learning.

As for the set priorities of SEECP participants, and of the European countries in general, the following stand out: enhancing basic skills for the purpose of improving job opportunities for low-skilled workers, providing recognition of qualifications, exploring needs for obtaining additional qualifications, dealing with the “brain drain” problem, encouraging practical entrepreneurial experience, developing and promoting vocational education in accordance with the labor market needs, developing digital skills, improving the availability of career information for a better choice of occupation and information on progress of highly educated students in the labor market.

Education in South-East Europe, being a key thematic area, has a direct relevance to the Europe 2020 Strategy, since education comprises its integral part and represents one of its key objectives. Fields such as early childhood education and care, vocational education, higher education, early school leaving and recognition of academic qualifications, as highly important, are particularly addressed in this report. Being left out from the EU2020, the Western Balkans region has developed its own strategy SEE2020 covering the WB6 and using the same monitoring indicators and data to oversee its development in several areas (integrated, smart, inclusive, sustainable and good governance), mirroring the EU2020 strategy.

II EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Early childhood education - preschool education has the major impact on development of child’s overall abilities. Neuroscience research suggests that neurological development of a child is the most intensive by the age of five, indicating the importance of investment, cognitive/mental stimulation and learning for children at the earliest possible age.

In line with their domestic and international acts, SEECP participants advocate for and take steps to establish effective early childhood education, in accordance with current scientific knowledge and best practices in this field. SEECP Participants make special efforts to increase the coverage by early childhood education, especially for children between the age of three up
to the compulsory school age, improving thus the quality of early childhood educational services, and introducing innovative, optimal and sustainable financing models.

Importance of cognitive stimulation during early child development is clearly stressed in Europe 2020 Strategy, which acknowledges early learning as one of its priority areas. One of the set goals is that 95% of children between the ages of three up to the compulsory school age should be included in early childhood education by 2020. At the same time, the Strategy focuses on equality, in line with the targets set out at the Barcelona Summit 2002. “Barcelona targets” represent a set of priorities determined by the EU in 2002 in order to ensure accessible and quality care for at least 90% of children.

Educational systems of SEECP Participants are particularly focused on developing inclusive education. The common aspiration is to make the education system more fair and accessible through customized, high quality and comprehensive services aimed to develop children’s potential to the greatest possible extent. It is important to provide access to education for children with special educational needs as well as to provide conditions for their development and education in a rational and operational manner through individualized and additional support.

The SEECP Participants have made significant steps in the past ten years to expand coverage of early childhood education. We are all obliged to make early learning available to all children from different groups in the region of South East Europe regardless of their region, ethnicity, socio-economic status and developmental characteristics.

Taking into account the specific features of education systems in each of SEECP participants, it can be concluded that the priorities in this area are similar to those set at the European level.

The perspectives of the further development of education should be focused on the availability of high quality lifelong education and the development of skills that are going to be relevant for employment. Particular emphasis should be places on strengthening non-discrimination at all levels of education, as well as further development of inclusive education. In order to improve the quality and efficiency of the education system, it is necessary to continue with sustainable investments and providing ongoing support to teaching staff. Likewise, it is necessary to implement measures to facilitate the mobility of pupils and students, as well as employees, while insisting on transparency and recognition of skills and educational qualifications.

**III VOCATIONAL EDUCATION**

The objectives set up in the Bruges communiqué, the Riga conclusions and the Strategic Framework for cooperation in education “Education and Training 2020” are a good basis for determining the priority areas in vocational education for the upcoming period. The most important priorities include: high-quality and efficient vocational education relevant to the labor market, equal opportunities for obtaining educational qualifications in vocational education, employability and social inclusion and lifelong learning and mobility.

In one hand, students who complete vocational education should be able to compete in the labor market, and in the other, this form of education should give them the level of general knowledge needed for the continuation of education.

In the previous period, many activities were conducted in the field of vocational education. Schools are creating an environment that encourages the development of critical thinking, innovation, creativity, teamwork, cooperation and respect for the other. In many countries, the implementation of career guidance and counselling activities in schools is carried out. Continuous professional development is provided for teaching staff.
A very important link in harmonizing the education system with the needs of the labor market is creating conditions for learning in the workplace. The condition for this is the cooperation with employers and creating conditions for students to get educated in a real working environment.

The emphasis should be placed on the knowledge that a student has obtained and how skilled he/she is for certain jobs after graduation. The teaching process aims at achieving the set learning outcomes, while simultaneously the autonomy of teachers is supported, and the emphasis is placed on students’ activities.

In the forthcoming period, emphasis needs to be given to providing good education in vocational and grammar schools as well as in adult education, through: initial quality and continuous education and training of teachers and other staff involved in educational work, providing adequate spatial, material and technical conditions in institutions, encouraging professional autonomy of teaching staff, introducing modern methods of teaching and learning that encourage independence, creativity and critical thinking of those who learn and results in a system of durable and applicable knowledge, and acquiring key competencies and transferring skills that allow social inclusion and active citizenship, needed to continue the education and inclusion in the labor market.

By continuing structural reforms in the field of education, special attention will be given to linking education system with the labor market, i.e. linking certain levels of education and enrolment policy.

In vocational education, emphasis will be put on further improving of practical education and learning in the workplace. Also, activities will be conducted to further improvement of social partnership and cooperation with employers’ associations in order to create conditions for dual education. Incentives for employers who educate students should support their active involvement in providing vocational education.

The quality assurance mechanisms will be enhanced in line with the European quality assurance system in vocational education, using information on the career of students who complete vocational education and decision-making on the basis of a coherent system for collecting and analyzing monitoring data and evaluating the results of initial and continuing vocational education.

The educational offer for vocational education and access to qualifications based on learning outcomes for young people and adults will be promoted. A flexible qualification system is being built, based on relevant information on missing skills and qualifications for different target groups, with developed career guidance and counselling mechanisms and recognition of previously acquired knowledge, regardless of the context of acquisition. Persons with special educational needs will be able to acquire qualifications gradually, in accordance with their abilities. This is of paramount importance for reducing the number of people who leave early the education system with no professional qualification, but also for those who want to resume the education.

**IV HIGHER EDUCATION AND HIGHLY EDUCATED PERSONS IN THE WORKFORCE**

Education reform in SEECP participants, which are not EU member states, aims to increase the efficiency of studying, ensure quality and harmonization of the national higher education system with European tendencies, in order to be successfully incorporated into a single European higher education area. The reformed higher education system is characterized by continuous quality control, introduction of a “diploma supplement” as a supporting document outlining the study program and degree, skills and competences, increasing of student and
teaching staff mobility, recognition of obtained educational qualifications and diplomas in accordance with Lisbon convention, the inclusion of students as partners in the educational process and the decision-making system and the development of the concept of lifelong learning.

All strategic objectives in the field of higher education of SEECP Participants are designed to develop an effective and high quality system of higher education and research that will promote social and economic development. Fulfilment of the strategic goals should result in further improvement of the quality of higher education, the connection between higher education and the labor market, increasing the share of the population aged 30-34 having completed tertiary education from 31% to at least 40% in 2020, established model of lifelong learning based on good international practice, research-oriented higher education, stable funding and internationalization of higher education.

Nowadays, special attention has been given to a worrying feature that noticeably large number of highly educated people is outside the labor market. One of the SEE2020 targets is increase in the number of highly qualified persons in the workforce (Target 7). The progress towards achieving target 7 was already made in 2014, with more than 500,000 highly educated persons added to the workforce since 2010. All the economies have seen an increase in the number of highly qualified people in the workforce and these numbers are expected to continue to grow by 2020. To achieve Target 7, the economies have committed to decreasing a number of early leavers from education and training systems and to increasing tertiary education attainment of the population aged 30–34. Namely the tertiary educational attainment indicator is defined as the share of the population aged 30–34 who have successfully completed a tertiary education program (for example, at a university or higher technical institution). The goal set by Europe 2020 and SEE2020 is to ensure that at least 40 % of 30–34 year-olds have completed a tertiary level of education by 2020. (ARI2017) ¹.

<p>| Table 1: SEE2020 Target 7 - Number of highly-educated persons in the workforce |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economy</th>
<th>2010 (baseline)</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2020 (target)</th>
<th>Progress from baseline towards target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TIRANA</td>
<td>158,000</td>
<td>163,972</td>
<td>171,819</td>
<td>202,991</td>
<td>217,407</td>
<td>244,731</td>
<td>247,646</td>
<td>260,000</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SARAJEVO</td>
<td>154,000</td>
<td>168,000</td>
<td>164,000</td>
<td>185,000</td>
<td>191,000</td>
<td>177,000</td>
<td>179,000</td>
<td>255,000</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRISTINA</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>92,000</td>
<td>99,000</td>
<td>104,000</td>
<td>101,000</td>
<td>104,200</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PODGORICA</td>
<td>43,000</td>
<td>47,200</td>
<td>50,500</td>
<td>57,800</td>
<td>59,500</td>
<td>62,500</td>
<td>69,600</td>
<td>68,000</td>
<td>106%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BELGRADE</td>
<td>568,446</td>
<td>579,591</td>
<td>604,316</td>
<td>634,684</td>
<td>717,851</td>
<td>757,226</td>
<td>783,000</td>
<td>655,000</td>
<td>248%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SKOPJE</td>
<td>164,481</td>
<td>182,853</td>
<td>191,213</td>
<td>183,500</td>
<td>183,874</td>
<td>204,952</td>
<td>222,964</td>
<td>204,000</td>
<td>148%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEE6</td>
<td>1,087,927</td>
<td>1,141,616</td>
<td>1,273,848</td>
<td>1,362,975</td>
<td>1,473,632</td>
<td>1,547,409</td>
<td>1,606,410</td>
<td>1,442,000</td>
<td>146%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Statistical Offices

Graph 1 (ARI 2017)

¹ http://www.rcc.int/pages/119/annual-report-on-implementation-of-the-see-2020-strategy
Over the past decade, there has been a continuous growth in enrolment to higher education, which resulted in a steady growth of tertiary education attainment in the region. However, the tertiary education attainment of the population aged 30 to 34 continues to be below the EU average in all the economies in the region. While the EU is expected to reach, and probably exceed, the 40% of 30 to 34 population with tertiary education, economies of the region are still lagging behind with Podgorica, Belgrade and Skopje in a better position with about 30% of 30 to 34 population with tertiary education attainment compared to Sarajevo with less than 25% and Tirana and Pristina below 20%.

In addition, the EUROSTUDENT reports for most of the economies show that the widening of access to higher education has not contributed equally to social mobility across the societies. In other words, socio-economic background of students continues to have an impact on access to and completion of higher education. Students from poorer families, rural areas, those whose parents have lower education and students from vulnerable groups, including Roma, continue to have difficulties to access and complete higher education.

The PISA results in the WB economies show worrying trends with regards to the competences of students. The expansion of the highly qualified workforce has been predominantly occurring in social sciences and humanities, with continuous decrease of enrolment and graduation in the math, science and technology, which places constraints to attracting investment towards technology intense industries. Therefore, future education policies should be focused on ensuring good education and developing incentives to increase enrolment in math, science and technology, with a special focus on the encouragement of women and girls to enroll in these fields.
All EU Member States have made significant progress in raising tertiary educational attainment. The increase in tertiary educational attainment levels across the EU is mirrored across all Member States. This to some extent reflects countries’ investment in higher education to meet demand for a more skilled labor force. Another factor is the shift to shorter degree programs following implementation of Bologna process reforms in some countries.

In 2016, 13 countries had already achieved their national targets on tertiary educational attainment. Bucharest was close at less than two percentage points from their national targets while Luxembourg and Slovakia were the most distant, at 11.4 and 8.5 percentage points, respectively, below their targets. In 2016, levels of tertiary educational attainment varied by a factor of about 2.3 across Europe. Northern and Central Europe had the highest percentage of tertiary graduates, with 18 countries exceeding the overall EU target of 40 %. The lowest levels could be observed in Bucharest, which were both around 26 %.

At the same time, some Eastern European countries experienced the strongest increases over the period 2008 to 2016. Changes were most pronounced in Athens where the shares almost doubled. While looking at non-EU Europe, the EFTA countries Norway, Switzerland and Iceland were at the level of the best performing Member States in 2016. However, the EU candidates Skopje and Ankara showed tertiary educational attainment levels similar to southern and eastern Member States.

V EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS

In the SEE2020 under the dimension D. Education and Competences the economies have committed to decreasing early leavers from education and training systems and to increasing tertiary education attainment of the population aged 30 – 34. Young people who leave the formal education and training prior to obtaining at least an upper secondary qualification, namely early leavers from education and training, are at a higher risk of unemployment, social exclusion and poverty compared to young people who have obtained a formal qualification. The percentage of early leavers from education and training has been steadily decreasing from 2010 to 2015 in all the economies (graph 5). However, the number differs significantly between the WB economies. While Podgorica, Belgrade and Skopje have had low numbers of early school leavers, also compared to the EU average, Tirana, Sarajevo and Pristina in particular have struggled with high rates of early leavers from education and training. (ARI2017)².

![Figure 1: Early leavers from education and training from 2010 to 2015 (age group 18-29)](image)

Graph 5 (ARI 2017)³

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² Ibid 2
³ Ibid 2
In the EU2020 the share of early leavers has fallen continuously from 17.0 % in 2002 to 10.7 % in 2016. This trend mirrors reductions in almost all Member States with the % of leavers planned to drop to 10 by 2020. (Graph 6)

Graph 6 [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Early_leavers_from_education_and_training]

Fifteen EU countries have already reached their national targets for the rate of early leavers from education and training. Southern European countries made particularly strong progress between 2008 and 2016. Educational attainment strongly influences labor market participation. In 2016, about 58 % of 18 to 24 year old early leavers from education and training were either unemployed or inactive. Of the total population of 18 to 24 year olds, 15.2 % were neither in employment nor in any further education or training, putting them at risk of being excluded from the labour market.

Rates of early leaving also vary widely across EU Member States. From the SEECP participants the degree varies with Ljubljana and Zagreb being under 10%, Bucharest and Sofia having the same degree of leavers capped at 15%. Of the candidates, Ankara has the highest share of early leavers, at more than three times the EU average. (Graph 7)

Graph 7 [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Early_leavers_from_education_and_training]

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4 Ibid 1
5 Ibid 1
VI RECOGNITION OF ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS

All SEECP participants with the exception of Pristina are members to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). They actively participate in the creation of the EHEA and as such follow the developments in the European region. Following the Bucharest Communiqué from 2013, the Yerevan Communiqué adopted at the last Bologna process Ministerial conference in 2015, clearly recognized the need for greater mobility of students and staff in order to foster mutual understanding. Equally, the Ministers underlined that they encourage automatic recognition to take place throughout the European continent by 2020 stressing that one of the current priorities should be ensuring “that qualifications from other EHEA countries are automatically recognized at the same level as relevant domestic qualifications”.6

Based on the Bologna process the SEE2020 Strategy through its Dimension on “Education and Competences” emphasizes the importance of removing obstacles for recognition of qualifications and supporting mobility, among other priorities. Furthermore, through the consolidated Multi-annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area (MAP REA) in the WB6, prepared in the context of the Berlin process and the Trieste summit, the importance of facilitating regional mobility is equally stressed (RCC 2017: 1). The MAP REA includes a Mobility Agenda that aims at:

• removing obstacles to mobility of professionals, through regional mutual recognition agreements of professional qualifications in sectors of mutual interest (doctors of medicine, dentists, architects and civil engineers);
• removing obstacles to mobility of highly qualified workforce, in particular through joint standards and procedures for automatic recognition of quality assured academic qualifications;
• measures and instruments aimed at increasing academic and research mobility and cooperation. (RCC 2017: 4)

The specific objective of removal of obstacles to recognition of academic qualifications demands to draft, adopt and implement a proposal on procedure for fast-track recognition in the region, on the base of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs), in accordance with the Bologna Process, based on learning outcomes, but also to establish an operational sub-regional network of ENIC/NARIC centers by 2019 and develop a joint online system to share information, including on higher education institutions, qualifications and decisions taken, available to ENIC/NARIC centres and Ministries in the region by 2020, and strengthen cooperation and exchange of information between Quality Assurance Agencies in the region (RCC 2017: 4). Governments of WB6 have committed themselves to implement measures which would lead to removing obstacles to recognition of academic qualifications and overall facilitate mobility in the region.

In the last two decades, various instruments aiming at facilitating fair recognition of foreign qualifications and/or study periods abroad have been developed, and adopted at the European, national, regional and institutional level. Two networks – the European Network of Information Centres in the European Region (ENIC) and the National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union (NARIC) work together to provide up-to-date information on current issues in international academic and professional mobility, and on procedures for the recognition of foreign qualifications. Tools such as ECTS, the Diploma Supplement, national qualifications frameworks and the overarching European qualifications frameworks, as well as the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance of Higher Education (ESG) also serve to improve recognition policy and practice. Yet despite the many efforts made in this area,

reporting has shown that the impact on institutional practice, where recognition issues are commonly managed, is insufficient.⁷
In SEE region all governments have also aligned their legislation with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and have established ENIC/NARIC offices. Challenges in most cases exist with quality assurance systems and alignment with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance and Accreditation, as well as reliability of information on accredited higher education institutions and issued academic qualifications, this is especially the case in WB. It is essential to ensure capacity to create independent quality assurance bodies aligned fully with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and transparent information on accredited higher education institutions, as well as to enhance communication and sharing of information between the relevant bodies in the region. It is important to keep in mind that any move forward in this area will significantly contribute to the development of automatic recognition in the region.