

8th International Stakeholder Conference of Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region - ONLINE

Smart and Social Responses to the Crisis: How Education, Training and Labour Market Policies can Contribute towards a Resilient Danube Region – REPORT –

Date: Thursday, 18 June 2020

Hosted by the Federal Ministry of Labour, Family and Youth and the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (Republic of Austria).

Key note inputs made available for the participants prior to the online conference

- Tracey Burns, Senior Analyst, Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, OECD – *Learning from the Crisis: Building Responsive and Resilient Education Systems and Schools*
- Action Group 3, led by Autonomous Province of Trento, EU Strategy for the Alpine Region – *Coping with the COVID-19 Crisis in Labour Market and Education Systems in Trentino, Italy*

Please find the videos here: <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/8th-international-stakeholder-conference-video-inputs-eusalp-oecd/>

The recording of the entire conference can be found here:
<https://youtu.be/Kr8sjswXWKQ>

Welcome to the meeting

- Roland Hanak, Priority Area Coordinator, Federal Ministry of Labour, Family and Youth, Austria
- Jürgen Schick, Priority Area Coordinator, Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Austria
- Valeriya Izhyk, Priority Area Coordinator, Ministry of Education and Science, Ukraine
- Anna Gherganova, Priority Area Coordinator, Ministry of Health, Labor, Social Protection, Republic of Moldova

The Priority Coordinators welcomed the audience and expressed their gratitude for the attendance at the online conference. They highlighted the importance of the [new Action Plan](#)

[of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region adopted on 6 April 2020](#) and its relevance for the upcoming activities in the light of the COVID19 crisis.

Panel discussion

‘Challenges of and responses to the crisis in the field of labour market and education systems’

- Katarina Ivanković-Knežević, Director of Social Affairs, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission

Katarina Ivanković-Knežević highlighted the importance of being prepared also for future crises. The reaction to the COVID crisis differed widely from one EU Member State to another. She stressed the importance of healthcare, and pointed out that there is a lack of human resources in the health sector. The EC has very quickly reacted to the crisis via the Corona Response Investment Initiative. Flexibility among funds has been increased. The EC took note of a huge increase of ESF demand. The crisis will also have an impact on the upcoming Structural Funds period, considering the lessons learnt from the crisis. The EC addresses the impact of the crisis also via e.g. the new skills agenda and the new employment initiative. The European Pillar of Social Rights is currently being promoted throughout the Union. An initiative on the child guarantee is going to be adopted by the end of 2021. Council conclusions on the minimum income are to be adopted under the incoming German presidency of the Council. The recently adopted demographic report of the EC will provide a sound basis for future policy decisions.

- Stefaan Hermans, Director of Policy Strategy and Evaluation in the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, European Commission

Stefaan Hermans pointed out that younger generations have grown up with the word ‘crisis’ throughout their youth. 100 million people in the EU are involved in education, for whom the crisis was a major change towards distance learning. He underlined two major aspects concerning the impact of the current situation. First, the shift to online education was a major challenge for schools, which was tackled with high commitment by principals, teachers and pupils. On a political level, the reaction to the crisis showed an unprecedented willingness to cooperate, e.g. several rounds of discussion between Commissioner Gabriel and education ministers of the MS. Second, the crisis shed light on underlying structural weaknesses in the educational system, e.g. the digital divide or the situation of vulnerable groups. The level of preparedness in the field of digitalization of education was rather weak. The differences of the EU MS’ reactions to the crisis are paramount, e.g. when it comes to rolling out distance education. The crisis made the inequality in education more visible, as vulnerable groups have a poor access to e-learning. The investment in education will be crucial in the aftermath of the crisis.

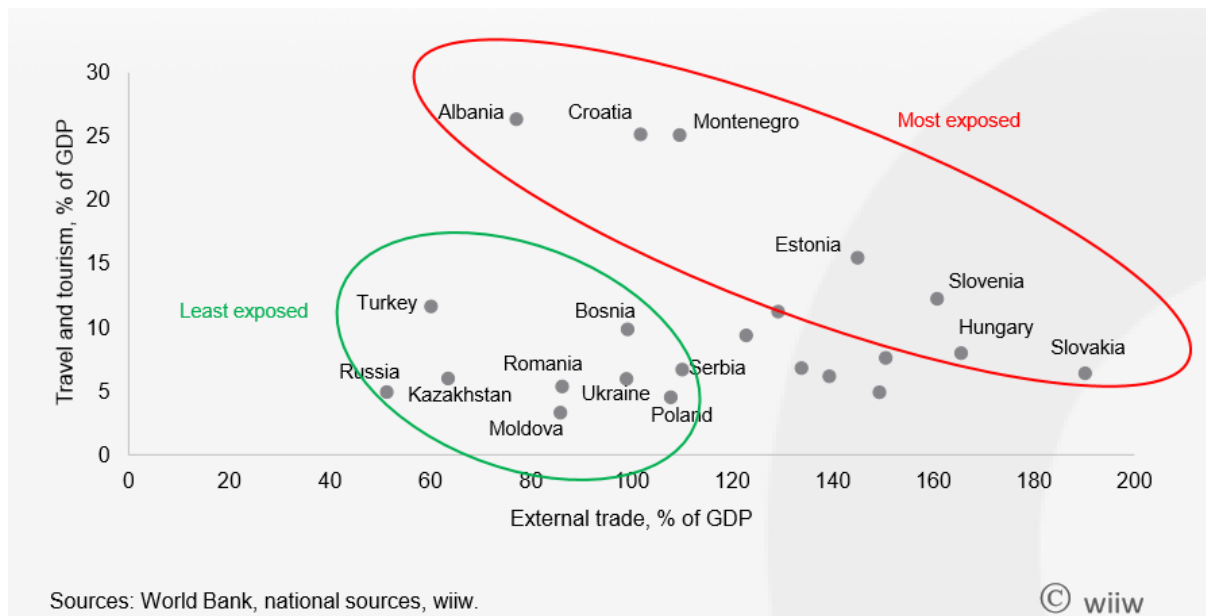
- Tina Šarić, Director of Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE) Secretariat

In the reaction to the crisis in the ERI SEE countries, Tina Šarić distinguished four levels and respective needs:

1. Governance: It matters to ensure that education is continued, via e-education platforms, educational TV shows, YouTube channels, etc. Croatia and Macedonia performed very well when it comes to using of electronic platforms.

2. Schools have organised different forms of electronic platforms for individualised learning. However, there was an insufficient number of digital devices provided as well as too little technical support. The response of schools was characterised by a lack of coordination.
 3. Teachers: An incredible shift and high awareness of digital learning could be noted. Moreover, training of teachers in this respect is needed.
 4. Families: Not all families were on the same level of preparedness and the crisis has made the digital divide more visible.
- Hermine Vidovic, Senior Economist, The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw)

See [presentation](#). The full impact of the crisis is not yet to be seen. Countries depending on foreign trade and tourism will be particularly affected by the crisis as well as economies in the Danube Region that are highly dependent on remittances.



- Stephan Waba, Deputy Head of IT didactics, Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Austria

Stephan Waba highlighted the crucial role of school in terms of equity and access to digital education. The crisis is going to change the educational world and e-solutions are to stay, which makes access to distant learning crucial. In this context, the open access to content and data will matter more than it has ever done. A new approach to education is going to be developed, with blended learning gaining in importance. Innovative approaches had to be implemented on a large scale due to the crisis. Artificial intelligence can help to provide content according to the needs of students, whereby the content finds the students and the teachers. The future of schooling using technology will be characterized to a higher extent by project-based learning. However, digital learning cannot and shall not replace face-to-face communication.

Discussion

Stefaan Hermans highlighted the exchange of experience among countries via interactive tools. The crisis provides a new window of opportunity for change. Following the ET2020 strategy, a new strategic framework is to be expected for the end of September 2020 to support the implementation of the European Education Area. Equal access to quality education throughout Europe will be a guiding principle. He stressed the importance of reaching out to the EU Member States when it comes to teacher's training and preparedness for future crises.

Katarina Ivanković-Knežević answered a question referring up-skilling and re-skilling, which is going to have a huge increase in the future budget, using not only the ESF+. Ageing can be seen as one of the major challenges in the EU, especially in the light of the crisis, where contingency measures were not fully in place. Vulnerable groups should not be forgotten, also when it comes to elderly care, but also as regards persons with disabilities or childcare.

Tina Šarić highlighted positive effects of the crisis: First, a change in attitude among teachers towards digitalization could be observed. Second, digital learning can be combined with face-to-face learning. Third, The skills of teachers vary widely. Teachers with higher levels of digital skills can share their knowledge with their colleagues. Particular focus should be put on training of teachers for e-skills. Fourth, pupils gained organizational skills during the lock-down phase.

Katarina Ivanković-Knežević replied to a question about risks for online courses for adult vocational training/job seekers. She highlighted the good practices of some member states in the field of care and nursing. Many courses do not require the classroom approach. However, some VET schools require practical training, which cannot be shifted to online. Stefaan Hermans added that the biggest challenge throughout the EU is upskilling and reskilling, and digital tools can increase participation in this field. Stephan Waba pointed out that e-solutions could increase the recognition of informal education, e.g. via micro-credits. However, challenges in the evaluation of attendance need to be considered in online training.

Referring to questions about the digital divide, Stephan Waba underlined the crucial role of parents in the school community. Digital education needs to be provided to the entire society with tailor-made approaches for diverse target groups, across age groups and different professional groups.

Hermine Vidovic answered a question about technological innovation in Southeast Europe. Innovation and related economic progress can serve as a remedy against emigration, e.g. in Serbia. The Western Balkans can be considered as a hub for platform work, online freelancers and platform work/economy, which (Serbia in particular), the latter also applies to Ukraine.

Katarina Ivanković-Knežević replied to a question about the role of kindergartens in the crisis. Kindergartens were opened sooner than other educational institutions. Informal education during the crisis had a huge impact on women. Hermine Vidovic added that the activity rates of women in the Western Balkans are rather low, which among others is due to both childcare and elderly care. Child care facilities are missing particularly in rural areas. Katarina

Ivanković-Knežević highlighted the need to adapt working hours of kindergartens to the working hours of parents.

Closure

The moderator thanked the panelists and discussants for their active participation and highlighted the experimentalist character of the event. Experiences of the event will be integrated into the planning of PA9 and results be taken up to the Steering Group of country representatives of PA9 of the EUSDR on 19 June.

