

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

A Resilient Danube Region through Digitalization, Inclusion and Education

– REPORT –

Date: June 17-18, 2021

Venue: videoconference

Hosted by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine in partnership with the Federal Ministry of Labour and the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research of the Republic of Austria, the Ukrainian Institute for International Politics, L&R Social Research and OeAD - Austria’s Agency for Education and Internationalisation.

Please find the final agenda and presentations from the speakers here:
<https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/events/9th-stakeholder-conference/>

Welcome speech and introduction

- Artur Seletskyi, Deputy Minister of Education and Science, Ukraine
- Olga Revuk, Deputy Minister of Social Policy, Ukraine
- Daria Bovkun, Priority Area 9 Coordinator, Ministry of Education and Science, Ukraine
- Roland Hanak, Priority Area 9 Coordinator, Federal Ministry of Labour, Austria
- Jürgen Schick, Priority Area 9 Coordinator, Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Austria
- Anna Gherganova, Priority Area 9 Coordinator, Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Protection, Republic of Moldova

The Speakers welcomed participants of the Conference, expressed their gratitude for the attendance and encouraged to participate actively in the panel discussions. The importance of Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” was emphasized considering that it is the one of thematic priorities chosen for the upcoming Ukrainian Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region in 2022. It was also highlighted that mutual cooperation is crucial for coping with the impact of the Covid-19 crisis within the fields of employment and education.

Panel discussion 1. Promotion of digital skills and competences in the Danube Region

- **Sarah Fellner (host)**, OeAD – Austria’s Agency for Education and Internationalisation, PAC9 Team

Sarah Fellner briefly introduced the topic of discussion for the participants.

- **Esa Kokkonen**, Policy Area Coordinator, EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) - Policy Area Innovation

Esa Kokkonen introduced the new EUSBSR Action Plan and pointed out the key issues reflected therein. In particular, the revised Action Plan is aimed at embedding EUSBSR into the EU policies & funding, promoting climate & neighbourhood cooperation (linking as well the non-EU countries), and setting up the Baltic Sea Strategic Point to provide administrative and technical support. It was also stated that the EUSBSR priority areas were intended to be more connected to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

He referred to the main topic of the Priority Area Innovation, notably – digitalization and digital transformation. In this case, the emerging digital technologies are recognized as the key tools to tackle societal challenges, facilitate new businesses, innovations, services and to develop BSR innovation and startup ecosystems. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, digital literacy, development of digital infrastructure, and introduction of digital facilities were outlined as the priority topics. As an example, Esa Kokkonen referred to a project launched in the sphere of education, primarily aimed at digital development of the school system, providing distance learning systems and electronic learning materials.

In the end, Esa Kokkonen announced that the EUSBSR is open for cooperation with the EUSDR with a view to develop various joint projects, notably in the spheres of education and digitalization.

- **Roksolana Shvadchak**, Acting Director-General on Digitalization in the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine

Roksolana Shvadchak acquainted the participants of the Conference with the national projects in the sphere of digitalization in education and science. She referred to the draft concept of the Ukrainian Strategy for digital transformation of education and science, which is primarily focused on modernization of the digital education environment, development of digital literacy of educators and scientists, providing of modern education content, as well as the transparency and efficiency of electronic processes and services, gathering digital data and analytics for qualitative policy making. There were introduced a range of measures for digital transformation in Ukraine. As an example, Roksolana Shvadchak named the introduction of Ukrainian School Online (a web-platform for distance learning) and E-Register for schools. She also mentioned the launching of trainings aimed at development of digital literacy of teachers and financing of digital facilities such as multimedia and computer equipment for universities and schools.

- **Danijela Šćepanović**, Education Policy Analyst, Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, Serbia

Danijela Šćepanović referred to the Serbian Education Strategy 2030, which directly addresses the sphere of digital education. Notably, there was drafted the Digital Education Action Plan on the basis of the findings of stakeholder consultations related to the topic of the current status of digital education in Serbia. In particular, it was established that the education institutions which had previously invested in their digital capacity before the Covid-19 outbreak, were better prepared for online learning process. There were also discussed the problems which arose as a result of the introduction of digital learning, such as the deepening of socio-economic inequalities and creation of new digital gaps, as well as problems with mental health. Based on recent research Danijela Šćepanović also confirmed that there are no problems with digital devices for online learning in Serbia. Thus, most students and teachers have access to the Internet as well as to digital devices for online learning. Moreover, teachers and students in need have the opportunity to borrow digital devices from schools. But, in any case, shifting traditional educational processes into online space still remains a challenge.

- **Martina Chvatalova**, Digital & Media Competence for Students and Teachers

Martina Chvatalova presented the project DigiMe realized jointly by Austria and the Czech Republic. The main goal of the project is to sustainably improve digital education in Austria and the Czech Republic, as well as to develop teachers` and pupils` digital skills and to prepare them for the digital future.

The project consists of 3 work packages:

1. Digital education for pupils
2. E-learning and workshops for teachers
3. Sustainable networking of schools of Austria and the Czech Republic

The project also encompasses the creation of an e-learning platform which will contain video tutorials, teacher`s materials, worksheets & workshop handouts and the timeline with the project activities.

Discussion

Sarah Fellner suggested to discuss the biggest challenges for implementation of digitalization strategies in the countries concerned.

Danijela Šćepanović highlighted the difficulties with catching up with the new IT-innovations, so that people cannot learn so fast to use and deal with the new IT and AI innovations. She also noticed that the new technologies are mostly high priced, so they may be unaffordable.

Panel discussion 2. Equal opportunities and inclusion in the Danube region

- **Jörg Mirtl (host)**, L&R Social Research, PAC9 Team

Jörg Mirtl introduced the agenda and speakers of Panel discussion 2.

- **Natalja Bovkun**, State Expert in the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine

Natalja Bovkun described the current situation with the employment opportunities for persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Ukraine. She told about the employment standard of PWDs, notably about the benefits and compensations for employers who adhere the fixed quota of job places for PWDs, as well as the administrative and economic penalties for those who do not adhere the quota. She also referred to the main barriers faced by PWDs in the labor market such as unequal opportunities, absence of barrier-free access to the workplace and of opportunities for training, development and promotion of PWDs.

Having analyzed the existing problems as well as the EU experience of introduction PWDs to the labor market, the Ukrainian government is currently preparing the draft law which is aimed to face the main challenges and to regulate employment relations between an employer and a person with a disability to serve the interests of both sides.

- **Claudia Singer**, Priority Area 10 Coordinator “Institutional capacity” of the EUSDR

Claudia Singer addressed the issue of social inclusion through the prospective of the Priority Area 10 “Institutional Capacity & Cooperation”. Notably, she emphasized that social inclusion depends on the ability of public authorities to apply inclusive decision-making processes. Further, she discussed 3 key dimensions of PA 10 – values, methods and governments with respect to social inclusion issue. In this regard, values such as transparency, openness and accountability were analysed. Claudia Singer insisted on the importance of tight and open communication of the government institutions with beneficiaries, citizens, representatives of civil society organizations, etc. It is also important to find out the methods which help to introduce and maintain the mentioned values. The main methods are collecting, exchanging and incorporating information which will be helpful to launch further the decision-making

processes. Finally, Claudia Singer referred to the governments issue and stated that the policy-making processes should result in respective policy outcomes which should address the needs of society.

Claudia Singer also briefly outlined two of the current priorities of PA 10, in particular the involving of young people and youth organizations in policy-making processes and development of the Danube region in general, and Roma inclusion to the operation of the Danube Strategy.

- **Mykhailo Dankanych**, Virtual Reality Unites Carpathians: Interactive School Laboratories

Mykhailo Dankanych presented the cross-border programme “Virtual Reality Unites Carpathians: Interactive School Laboratories” which is jointly realized by Romania and Ukraine. The programme was launched in response to the low rates of education levels of pupils from the schools in Zakarpattya. This is a pilot project which currently encompasses 2 schools in Romania and 2 schools in Ukraine in the Carpathian region, and represents the following initiatives:

1. Introduction of Scratch learning in schools
2. Introduction of VR units as a tool of educational process

Both initiatives are aimed to diversify the educational process and to motivate pupils to visit schools and to be active during lessons.

As a result of the realization of the named project, it will be possible to analyze the impact of VR technologies implementation on the educational process. In case of a positive impact, this initiative can be further spread to other schools in the region.

- **Paul Downes**, Director of the Educational Disadvantage Centre, Dublin City University
Professor Paul Downes described six steps aimed at the promotion of inclusive systems for early school leaving prevention, in particular:

- Step 1. Promote positive school and class climate: beyond authoritarian teaching which based on fear and anger
- Step 2. Bridging health and education to address trauma and complex mental health needs
- Step 3. School bullying – which remains to be a greater factor for early school leaving than poverty or poor academic performance
- Step 4. Alternatives to strategies of suspension/expulsion through multidisciplinary teams
- Step 5. Public health model of differentiated strategies in place – for meeting individual needs at different levels of need/risk
- Step 6. A holistic curricular focus on social and emotional education.

Paul Downes also referred to the topic of how the COVID-19 pandemic affects early school leaving. He noted that there is a very big fear that early school leaving is going to increase because of motivational aspects, loneliness, as well as domestic violence and conflicts during lockdowns.

Concluding remarks

The moderators of both panels thanked the participants for the fruitful discussion. It was noticed that the topics of the panels were closely interrelated since nowadays social inclusion and education opportunities are tightly connected with the digitalization process. Jörg Mirtl and Sarah Fellner expressed their anticipation of further beneficial cooperation of all parties concerned. It was stated as well that the countries can manage to build up a resilient Danube Region by sharing experience and working together.

Panel discussion 3. Enhancing cooperation between vocational education and training and labour market in the Danube region

- **Gennadiy Rusanov (moderator)**, Deputy Team Leader PL/EU4Skills

Gennadiy Rusanov greeted the participants of the conference and announced the agenda of the Panel discussion 3.

- **Iryna Shumick**, Director-General on Vocational Education and Training in the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine

Iryna Shumick described the VET system in Ukraine. It was highlighted that VET is an independent section of the Ukrainian education system, which provides a possibility to get knowledge and skills in a certain profession. She also emphasized the importance of support provided by the international partners of Ukraine in the sphere of VET, for instance, within such projects as the EUSDR, EU4Skills Programme: better skills for modern Ukraine, International Labour Organization “Inclusive Labour Market for Job Creation in Ukraine”, USAID Project “Economic Resilience Activity for the Eastern Ukraine”. Referring to the EUSDR initiative, Iryna Shumick defined 2 areas of interest for the further development of the VET system in Ukraine, notably: Labour Market and Social Policy, Education and VET; and described the expected ways of future cooperation.

She also stated the particular interest of Ukraine in the development of international mobility and told about the steps which have already been made towards the mobility of VET and recognition of professional qualifications obtained abroad.

- **Natalya Vasylenko**, State Expert in the Ministry of Economy of Ukraine

Natalya Vasylenko stated that the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the employment rate and Ukrainian labour market as a whole. In particular, such spheres as hospitality, entertainment and service industries were heavily affected by the pandemic restrictions, which has led to a significant reduction of employed people. The government is currently working on enhancing interconnection between education and labour sectors, notably through the improvement of the national qualification system and introduction of a lifelong learning system. She also referred to the measures taken by the State Employment Service of Ukraine towards the development of vocational education. As an example, the State Employment Service provides vocational education trainings for registered unemployed people on the basis of particular VET centers. It was also mentioned that the State Employment Service developed an education portal which contains examples of CVs, guidance on interview skills, various educational courses, as well as vocational orientation tests so a person concerned may define his/her professional orientation and check his/her existing skills.

- **Dmytro Vterkovsky**, Director-General, SE “Production Association “Carpathians”

Dmytro Vterkovsky told the audience about SE “Production Association “Carpathians”, its working environment, the process of staff learning and training. He emphasized that one of the main priorities for the enterprise is to ensure and maintain adequate working and leisure conditions for its employees. The enterprise actively cooperates with the vocational training institutions in the Ivano-Frankivsk region, as well as the National Technical University of Oil and Gas, Precarpathian National University, Burshtyn Energy College and other educational institutions, and undertakes efforts to employ their graduates. There was established a training center where technologists and engineers, who are already employed on the enterprises, provide payable trainings for interns during 3-4 months, so the interns may immediately start working after successful completion of training.

- **Silviu Gincu**, Head of Department for technical professional education, Ministry of Education, Culture and Research, Republic of Moldova

Silviu Gincu described the economic profile of Moldova, its main pillars (service, industry and agricultural sectors) and the existing challenges related to the demography. He also presented the VET system established in the Republic of Moldova, told about institutions and government bodies involved, and named the dual VET as a main priority in this sector. Further he referred to the particular measures taken within the digitalization policy and introduction of social education in the VET system. Finally, there were highlighted the main priorities in developing the VET system for the period of 2021-2022, in particular:

- bringing the VET system in line with the requirements of the labour market;
- increasing the attractiveness of and facilitating access to the VET system;
- modernizing VET infrastructure;
- digitalizing the VET system;
- ensuring the capacity building of VET institutions.

- **Georgios Zisimos**, Head of Policy Advice and EU Programming Unit, European Training Foundation (ETF)

Georgios Zisimos presented the main points of the ETF Strategy 2027 which are connected to the PA9 of the Danube Strategy. Notably, he referred to the key issues of the Single Programming Document (SPD) Work Programme 2021, which are:

- skills demand analysis;
- sustainability, inclusion and resilience through active labour market policies and the skill dimensions of labour mobility;
- modernization of qualification systems;
- vocational excellence provision models;
- innovative teaching and working;
- engaging enterprises in skills development;
- lifelong learning policies;
- quality assurance and governance mechanisms.

Panel discussion 4. Financial instruments to support implementation of PA9 EUSDR

- **Nadija Afanasieva (moderator)**, Director of the Ukrainian Institute for International Politics
Nadija Afanasieva greeted the participants of the conference and introduced the main topics of the Panel discussion 4. She also encouraged the active participation and discussion during the session.

- **Henk Visser**, Programme Coordinator, Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) Programme

Henk Visser told about the background of the EaSI Programme 2014-2020 and smoothly shifted to the description of the EaSI strand under ESF+ for the period of 2021-2027. Besides the EaSI, ESF+ also combines the experiences of the previous ESF, the Youth Employment Initiative and Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived. Its general objectives directly correlate with the European Pillar of Social Rights and encompass the aim of high employment levels, fair social protection, skilled and resilient workforce ready for the future world of work, inclusive and cohesive societies aiming to eradicating poverty. The ESF+ recognizes the following horizontal principles: gender equality, equal opportunities, non-discrimination. At the same time, EaSI strand will specifically focus on employment, skills, social protection, social inclusion and working conditions.

Henk Visser also referred to the main ways of receiving funding under the EaSI (grants, prizes, procurement and voluntary payments) and briefly described the EaSI work.

- **Johannes Gabriel**, Project Officer of the Danube Transnational Programme

Johannes Gabriel updated the participants with regard to the new DTP 2021-2027 period. Notably, he referred to certain novelties such as the introduction of the Programme Priority 3 which will deal with most of the social and educational topics. He also defined the priority objectives of the DTP 2021-2027, which are:

- a smarter Europe
- a greener, low-carbon Europe
- a more social Europe

as well as two specific objectives of the newly introduced Programme Priority 3:

- 1) Enhancing the effectiveness and inclusiveness of labour market and access to high quality employment through developing social infrastructure and promoting social economy;
- 2) Improving access to inclusive and quality services in education, training and lifelong learning through developing infrastructure, including by fostering resilience for distance and on-line education and training.

- **Tetiana Biletska**, Deputy Director of the Reform Support Team (RST) at the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine

Tetiana Biletska told about the ERASMUS+ and other donor-funded programmes supporting cooperation of educational actors from Ukraine and other countries of the Danube Region. She introduced the free online search tool EuroAccess aimed to support the use of existing funding opportunities. She also referred to several EU financial instruments directly or indirectly corresponding to the field of educational and training:

- 1) ERASMUS+

Several opportunities which ERASMUS+ provides for in the VET sector, like the establishment of centres of excellence or provision of mobility opportunities for VET and higher education, were also mentioned.

- 2) HORIZON Europe

The EU's key funding programme for research and innovations.

- 3) Creative Europe

The framework programme introduced by the European Council to support the culture and media sectors.

- 4) House of Europe

The EU-funded programme fostering professional and creative knowledge exchange in the fields of culture and creative industries, education, health, social entrepreneurship, media, youth.

Concluding remarks

Closing statements were made by Jürgen Schick, Roland Hanak, Anna Gherganova and Nadija Afanasieva. The Speakers briefly summed up the results of the 2-day Stakeholder Conference and expressed their readiness for further fruitful cooperation and discussions. They also thanked the panellists for their active participation and expressed their gratitude to the Ukrainian side for the organization of the Conference.