



# Ten Years of Investing in People and Skills in the Danube Region

edited by  
**L&R Social Research and OeAD**

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 Federal Ministry  
Republic of Austria  
Labour



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Education, Science  
and Research



EUROPEAN UNION



# **Ten Years of Investing**

## in People and Skills in the Danube Region

edited by

**L&R Social Research** and **OeAD**

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## Abbreviations

<b>ADA</b>	Austrian Development Agency
<b>CoVE</b>	Centre of Vocational Excellence
<b>DG EMPL</b>	Directorate-General for Employment and Social Affairs
<b>DG REGIO</b>	Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy
<b>EaSI</b>	European Programme for Employment and Social Innovation
<b>EC</b>	European Commission
<b>ENE</b>	ETF's (European Training Foundation's) Network for Excellence
<b>ENESAT</b>	ENE Self-Assessment Tool
<b>ESF</b>	European Social Fund
<b>ESIF</b>	European Structural and Investment Funds
<b>ESL</b>	Early School Leaving
<b>ERDF</b>	European Regional Development Fund
<b>ERI SEE</b>	Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe
<b>ET</b>	Education and Training
<b>ETF</b>	European Training Foundation
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EUSDR</b>	EU Strategy for the Danube Region
<b>EUSBSR</b>	EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>GRETA</b>	Greening Responses to Excellence through Thematic Actions
<b>ICT</b>	Information and Communications Technology
<b>MA</b>	Managing Authority
<b>MRS</b>	Macro-regional strategies
<b>MS</b>	Member State
<b>NCTVETD</b>	National Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training Development of Romania
<b>NEETs</b>	Persons Not in Education, Employment, or Training
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>OeAD</b>	Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation

<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>PA</b>	Priority Area
<b>PAC</b>	Priority Area Coordinator
<b>SEE</b>	South Eastern Europe
<b>SEEVET Net</b>	South Eastern European Vocational Education and Training Network
<b>SELFIE</b>	Self-reflection on Effective Learning by Fostering the use of Innovative Educational Technologies
<b>SME</b>	Small and medium-sized enterprises
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>VET</b>	Vocational Education and Training
<b>WBL</b>	Work-Based Learning
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization
<b>YEI</b>	Youth Employment Initiative

## Introduction by the European Commission

In 2021, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) celebrates its 10th anniversary. Over the years, the EUSDR provided stimulus to start new projects and processes of macro-regional relevance all across the region. The access to know-how and best practices within the macro-region has been of great benefit to numerous actors at all levels who were looking for new approaches and solutions when designing and implementing policy.

In this respect, the focus of Priority Area 9 is crucial, investing in people and skills is a cross-cutting precondition for success in all fields of action of the Strategy. Education, training and modern labour markets are key drivers for more equitable and inclusive societies. The inclusion of marginalized groups helps to bring about well-being of all citizens in the region, making sure no one is left behind. This is of particular importance in the geographical area covered by the EUSDR, which includes some of Europe's most competitive but also some of its poorest regions. It is a place where we find some of the most highly skilled workforces of Europe but also some of the least educated, and where the differences in living standards still are striking.

The work carried out by Priority Area 9 (PA9) has been instrumental in bringing education closer to businesses and their needs, in optimizing the links between the labour market and the educational system, in supporting continuous education and training for small and medium-sized enterprises MEs, creative industries and green businesses and in bringing creativity closer to entrepreneurial education and training.

Another challenge was to identify ways to modernize the educational systems in the Danube countries, including vocational training, and make them more fit for the demands of the future. Activities have looked at how to increase the labour market relevance of higher education in order to retain young talents studying and working in the region, with a view to counteract the brain drain that haunts parts of the region. Yet a theme has been to introduce new approaches in teaching and learning to empower students to take an active role in shaping the future of their region. Further enabling and facilitating entrepreneurship, not the least among youth, is crucial for the future development of the Danube region. Over the years, Priority Area 9 took on-board this challenge through numerous dedicated projects.

Moreover, in the field of social inclusion, several projects were targeting the inclusion of Roma into the labour market as well as Roma children into the education system. Training opportunities for NEETs were assessed and a transnational network of socially responsible traditional businesses, financial investors, policy-makers, and academia created. Finally, the issue of improved capacity of public institutions to respond to the needs of newly arrived migrants was analysed.

In conclusion, during the last ten years, the activities of Priority Area 9 have covered a broad range of highly relevant topics in the area of people and skills. It has included and empowered a very broad range of stakeholders across the Danube region. The Priority Area is coordinated by Austria, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. A particular success has been this cooperation between EU and non-EU countries in the running of the priority area. Priority Area 9 can pride itself of being a pioneer among EUSDR priority areas in cooperating with European Union neighbourhood countries and in bringing in the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine as equal partners in the governance of the priority area. Like this, these countries were prepared for further cooperation with the European Union and an excellent example for the whole Strategy was set. Today, the countries of the European neighbourhood are ready to take on new challenges, Ukraine takes over the Presidency of the EUSDR in 2021!

For the years to come, the green and digital transition will continue to feature high on the European political agenda. I am very happy to see that Priority Area 9 already has been addressing various aspects of these issues. It has been supporting initiatives and projects in fields such as raising the ecological awareness and including it in school curricula, training for specialized digital competences and raising the awareness of the challenges related to the digitisation of work.

Looking ahead to the next ten years, I wish you all success in taking your topics further with the aim to help bringing about a Danube region that is ready to fully meet the challenges of the future, a unique place where life loves to live. ●

**JOHAN MAGNUSSON**

Team Leader, EU Strategy for the Danube Region and  
for the Baltic Sea Region, European Commission

## Introduction by the Priority Area Coordinators

Investing in people and their skills was identified as one of twelve key fields (Priority Areas) for cooperation in the framework of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. After the communication of the Strategy by the European Commission, its adoption by the Council and its endorsement by the European Council, the implementation started in 2011. Fourteen countries<sup>1</sup>, among them nine EU Member States and five non-EU countries, are part of the macro-regional policy framework.

Over the past ten years, Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” has initiated important activities to promote collaboration, knowledge transfer and people-to-people contacts in the fields of education and training, labour market and marginalised communities. Coordinated by Austria, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, Priority Area 9 is in itself an example of cooperation at equal levels between EU and non-EU countries. Through meetings, conferences and outreach efforts, a wide network of stakeholders, including governmental officials and members from international organisations, civil society and academia is involved in the coordination and implementation of the Priority Area.

Representatives from the Danube Region countries and regions, mainly from labour and education ministries, but also from civil society and Vocational Education and Training (VET) agencies, meet and exchange knowledge and experiences regularly as part of the Steering Group of Priority Area 9. In addition to a dialogue at the policy level, Priority Area 9 is an umbrella for various projects in the framework of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. By the end of 2021, more than 170 cross-border and regional Danube networks and projects were started or labelled by Priority Area 9.

We take the 10-year anniversary of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region as an opportunity to look back at the last decade of collaboration. The texts contained in this publication highlight selected measures and actions and reflect on what could be

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<sup>1</sup> Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Germany (Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria), Hungary, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine (Chernivetska, Ivano-Frankivska, Odessa, Zakarpatska).



further achieved in the future. At the interface of policymaking, implementation and research, the publication contains contributions from the coordination team of Priority Area 9, partners from the European Commission and Danube Region countries, and from academia.

The chapter on labour market and inclusion highlights the initiatives that preceded the EU Strategy for the Danube Region and the networks that emerged from it. The latter include networks for the design of the European Social Fund, bilateral and multilateral exchange of experience on labour market policy, the inclusion of marginalised communities such as the Roma and – more recently – a strengthened focus on policies dealing with youth in the Danube Region.

The chapter on education and training describes the cooperation framework of Priority Area 9 and highlights several Danube Region initiatives and projects. Key topics include innovative forms of teaching and learning, the importance of regional collaboration, developing vocational education and training, learning mobility, digital skills, civic, intercultural and social competences, empowerment and inclusive education.

We would like to thank all contributors very much for sharing with us their insights and initiatives in support of the Social Danube Region. We also take this opportunity to express our appreciation to all stakeholders who contributed to the work of Priority Area 9 and to our common goal of improving the quality of life in the Danube Region.

Cooperation in the framework of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region is key to tackling together the challenges that lie ahead of us: from overcoming the COVID-19 crisis to successfully managing the green and digital transition in Europe. Efforts to promote education and labour market opportunities for all, including marginalised communities, play a vital role to empower people in the Danube Region to realise their full potential and actively shape the future of their region. The initiatives and opportunities introduced in this publication showcase how more can be achieved by working together.

We look forward to continuing our collaboration, exchanges, and joint efforts in promoting people and skills in the Danube Region in the future. ●

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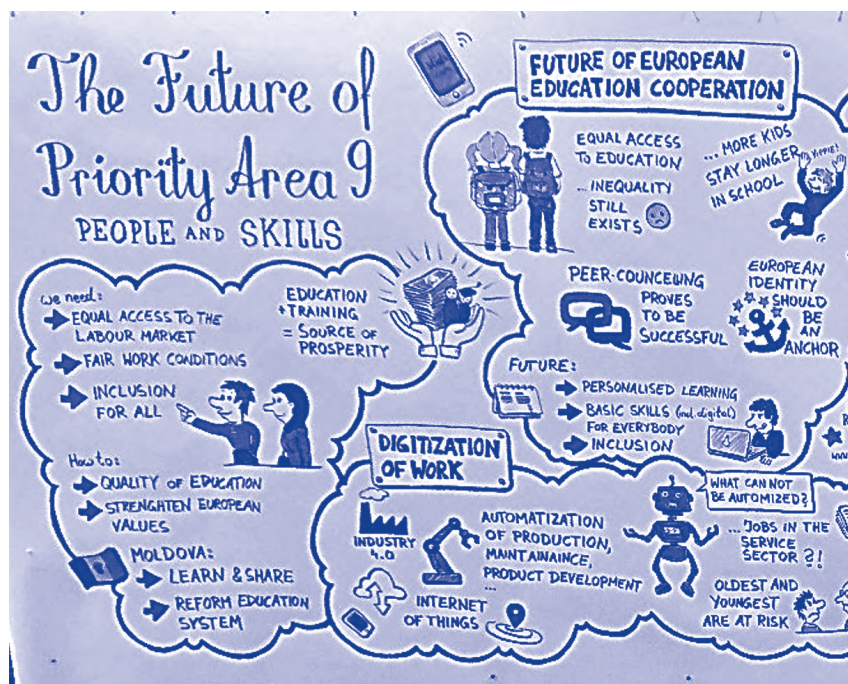
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# Labour Market and Inclusion



## Ten Years of Priority Area „People and Skills“ (PA 9) of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR): Why Social Policies are beneficial to the Danube Region Context

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### **The beginning**

When the European Union Strategy for Danube Region (EUSDR) started, everything had to start from nothing. While in a pure European Union (EU) context, competences and roles are more or less clearly distributed, the start of the EUSDR proved to be somewhat challenging: A political will existed and a decision was taken, but there was no governance system in place. Not only EU Member States, but also (potential) Candidate Countries and Countries of the European Neighbourhood were invited to cooperate at equal levels. Following the appointment of the thematic coordinators of the Strategy (Priority Area Coordinators, PACs) in early 2011, the initial situation became even more demanding when later that year the Council stated that there would be no new law, no new funding and no new institutions supporting the Strategy. While each strategy is about how to use means efficiently, it was surprising to see that there were no allocated funds at all (except for technical assistance and pilot projects provided by the European Parliament via the Commission). As a matter of fact, we quickly learned that one of the main questions of the Strategy – simply said – was how to do something with nothing. Even more surprisingly, over the years, Priority Area 9 (PA9) managed to do just that. This is the story of how results were achieved from a very challenging start.

But first things first. Without any doubt, the European Union has always worked towards creating a joint labour market, which comes with its basic freedoms of movement of persons, services, capital, and goods. The European Social Fund, the main financial instrument to implement labour market policy in the EU, has already been created with the Treaty of Rome in the late 50s.

However, within the Danube Region, the situation varies greatly: Nine out of fourteen participating countries are EU Member States, three are (potential) candidate countries and two are countries of the European Neighbourhood.<sup>2</sup> These differences in terms of the relationships with the common market of the EU also include different policies and funding schemes. Even among the EU Member States in the Danube Region, the economic differences between the wealthier Member States and the less affluent ones – and even within states – are so stark that it is difficult to talk about a fully-integrated labour market.

The administrative situation of PA9 and the circumstances in the beginning were hence far from being optimal. Nevertheless, we tried our best to implement the Strategy and get it on track. First, by establishing networks of our counterparts in the other countries (the “Steering Group”), with the Republic of Moldova sharing our coordination role – an aspect which would bring a strong neighbourhood policy and cooperation component to the Priority Area Coordination from the very start. Second, from the beginning, we established ties with project promoters and implementers in the countries within and beyond the Danube Strategy. Third, we drew upon the valuable experiences from the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, another and the first macro-regional strategy of the EU, which shares our experiences.

What unfolded was a unique experience for us. Unlike projects, we did not deal with one specific problem in a defined area. Unlike programmes, we did not invest money into actions, the results of which we would have been able to assess and measure. Unlike policies in an EU context or on a national level, we could not implement a specific political will that was written down in some government programme or in a multilateral mechanism like the European Semester. So, what was this new macro-regional thing all about then? Another regional coordination mechanism? More of the same? Or just a good idea with little chances for success?

Despite these challenging circumstances, we were soon to realize to what extent the Danube Strategy was a unique opportunity, a catalyst for new projects and initiatives, and a great tool for capitalisation. Against this background, in the endeavour of making the Strategy a reality, we built upon existing bilateral labour market initiatives since the 1990ies and other cooperation

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<sup>2</sup> With Croatia joining in 2013, initially, there were only eight EU Member States in the Danube Region.

projects with the then new Member States that joined the EU in 2004, 2007, and 2013 (see articles by Walter Reiter and Clemens Ragl in this volume) or the existing Austrian cooperation with the Republic of Moldova. In this text, we would like to briefly address some of the main issues we have been working on and how we did so.

### **Policy development**

At the aforementioned interface of policies, programmes and projects and building upon existing initiatives, we attempted to place ourselves in the new macro-regional context and focused on the following four policy fields (adapted in 2019):

- Intensify Cooperation in Labour Market Policies
- Digitalisation and Innovation in the World of Work
- Integration of Vulnerable Groups into the Labour Market
- Fighting Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion for All

While these fields provide us with a very wide framework of (inter)action, they share common patterns that are of utmost importance for the Danube Region, e.g. the joint goal to work towards inclusive growth, towards more inclusive labour markets and education systems. To provide an evidence basis for these policies, we have developed and designed the “Danube Region Monitor”<sup>3</sup>, a statistical tool to showcase, compare and analyse the socio-economic development in the Danube Region with a specific focus on trends in the fields of the labour market and education. The latest issue of the Danube Monitor published in 2019 reiterates what has shaped the cooperation in the Danube Region since the beginning of the Danube Strategy: There are significant socio-economic differences throughout the macro-region. Nevertheless, for instance, in the last decade, the human development index has been improving all over the Danube Region and the economic outlook seems rather positive, depending on the further development of the pandemic. However, there are also shortcomings. For instance, many of the countries in the Danube Region have a share of young people neither in employment nor in education and training (NEETs) that is significantly higher than the average in the European Union. Moreover, some of the least affluent regions of the entire European Union can be found in the Danube Region, but also some of the wealthiest ones.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/Danube-Region-Monitor.pdf>



Considering these circumstances, it seems rather challenging to formulate joint transnational policies – also with a view to the fact that the nine EU Member States in the Danube Region follow anyway the same strategic frameworks on the supranational level of the EU27. However, there are common patterns that make cooperation in a strategic context indispensable, and the EUSDR provides us with a joint platform to make this possible.

But how did we do that? At the beginning of the Strategy (and still nowadays), there were a lot of meetings. Coordination and structure were necessary to start the Strategy's engines. Getting to know each other, shaping a "Danubian" team spirit, should not be underestimated when it comes to building transnational capacities and, not the least, trust. Projects and potential funding sources for project ideas were identified. An annual Stakeholder Conference, in place since 2011, was held ten times so far, with the participation of stakeholders from all over the Danube Region, sometimes including the minister's level and experts from international institutions, as well as project promoters.

Following the preliminaries, one key question was to make things happen, meaning to demonstrate that the Strategy could be translated into concrete actions, initiatives and projects. This implied that the Strategy would need to be embedded, meaning that it should be considered by funding institutions, by their programming, planning and the respective policies. To do so and following the conclusions of a meeting of Ministers responsible for the European Social Fund (ESF) 2015 in Ulm (Germany), a network of Managing Authorities (MA) of the ESF was established and since then successfully adds its Danube spice to a meal that is cooked primarily in a national framework (see the contribution by Barbara Willsberger and Claudia Singer on the ESF MA network in this volume).

Moreover, there was a transnational Interreg programme – the Danube Transnational Programme – from 2014 onwards tailored exactly towards the needs of the Danube Region, supporting the PACs, Danube Strategy projects, and sharing the same geographic coverage. These two aspects demonstrate what macro-regional strategies like the Danube Region Strategy are capable of – despite many doubts and criticism that accompanied it since its beginning. One of the main features of the Strategy is, however, to combine investment and cooperation, be it bilateral, multilateral or international. It thereby provides

international relations with more flesh on the bones and, in turn, gives investment and projects on the ground an international perspective but also an attitude that is clearly strategic, open-minded, future-orientated, and truly European.

Against this background, it should be borne in mind that the Strategy, especially when it comes to aspects such as jobs, schools and inclusive societies, is not a goal in itself. Since its beginning, the Danube Strategy and other macro-regional strategies have created a lot of bureaucratic exercises, red tape and navel gazing and therefore risk to lose sight of what they were really created for. In the case of the Danube Region and our Priority Area 9 “People and Skills”, it is the attempt to help providing people with jobs in an ever-changing world of work, to cope with the challenges and opportunities of digitalisation in the labour market and in education, and to work towards an inclusive Danube Region, where the basic needs of everyone, including marginalised communities, are met and high standards and core values of living together and social justice are upheld.

### **Extending the Coordination – Ukraine as Co-Priority Area Coordinator (Co-PAC)**

One of the aims of the Danube Strategy is to bring EU Member States and Candidate/Neighbourhood Countries together on a level-playing field. Having coordinated this Priority Area together with the Republic of Moldova since 2011, in 2018, we decided to continue our work as Priority Area Coordinators with our partners from Ukraine in addition. This even improved our standing at the interface of a deeper and a wider Europe, making it “deeper” via strengthening the cooperation of EU Member States in the Danube Region, and making it “wider” by establishing an ever-closer relationship with the (potential) Candidate Countries and the Countries of the European Neighbourhood. What is often seen as a potential deficiency of the Danube Strategy – its “soft” character with a relatively loose definition – in reality often proves to be a considerable advantage, as this very openness can make things happen without the constraints that are often to be found in more formalised contexts and formats.

## COVID-19

The epidemic starting in 2019 has put considerable pressure on the labour markets and education systems in the Danube region. With relatively low vaccination rates compared to the Western European countries, many South-Eastern European countries face serious challenges. Measures such as short-time work, distance learning, subsidies for companies can help overcoming the crisis, which is also an economic one. In the most recent past, we have tailored our events, as well as policy and project development towards the needs that rose from the COVID-19 crisis. As every crisis is an opportunity in disguise, we see a great deal of chances for the next years to come, especially when it comes to making our societies more digital and more sustainable.

## Outlook

For the next ten years, we will face major developments in the Danube Region. Many of them are related to aspects of innovation, be it technical innovation rendering possible more flexible labour markets and education systems, or social innovation redefining the ways and approaches of how people arrange and manage their living-together. On its way towards a prosperous, resilient and inclusive macro-region, the Danube Region needs primarily a lot of trust: between the governments and the citizens, but also among the 14 countries of the Danube Region. This is going to be ever more important with global competition and the geopolitical role Europe – and in its centre the Danube Region – have to play. The Danube Region has always been a very diverse region. This diversity should increasingly be understood as a source of wealth and as a big opportunity. In times of global competition, the challenges of the future are not going to be smaller. In turn, the Danube Region will have to rely on flexible and digitised labour markets that can react to rapidly changing needs, as well as to modern education systems, that can ensure that youngsters are provided with the skills the markets need but also the ones they need themselves. To do that, it is essential that the Danube Region involves its young people in its governance and also puts an emphasis on their involvement in its specific policies. This is even more important when it comes to building a 'Danubian identity', where people in the Danube region feel a true commitment to the Danube Region. One possibility to do that would be to develop a 'macro-regional meritocracy', where young people who are interested in the

macro-regional approach join a platform, get the chance to bring in their ideas, and even to work for the Strategy, whenever the prospect arises.<sup>4</sup> This being said, our main focus will remain those young people in the Danube Region, who struggle to get a job, the right education, skills, or training.

At PA9 of the EUSDR, we consider ourselves to be ‘Danubians’ and we are ready to do our part to invest in the future of a resilient and sustainable Danube Region. We are also ready to contribute to an international environment that is conducive to a Danube Region that invests both wisely and comprehensively in its people and their skills. ●

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<sup>4</sup> This idea was already put forward in Roggeri, A. (2015), ‘Could Macro-regional Strategies be more Successful?’, *European Structural & Investment Funds Journal*, 2015: 1–11.

# Ten Years of Co-Coordination of Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” of the Republic of Moldova

Investing in  
People and Skills

**ANNA GHERGANOVA**

Ministry of Labour and Social Protection,  
Republic of Moldova

In the last ten years, Priority Area 9 (PA 9) of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) has been a platform for collaboration in labour market policy. The Republic of Moldova fulfilled the important role of being the co-coordinator of PA 9 together with Austria. Being the first cooperation of coordinating a Priority Area of a neighbourhood country and an EU Member State in the Danube Region, administrative structures, both pre- and co-financing, first level control, evaluation and reporting had to be developed from the beginning and, in the long run, became very successful.

Together, we addressed labour market issues such as long-term unemployment, inclusion of NEETs and other vulnerable groups into the labour market, and skill development for a more competitive labour force. These issues are still being discussed and project ideas were developed within specific workshops. Some examples include: “Dual Education and Other Modern Forms of On-The-Job Training in Countries in the Danube Region”; “Empowering People with Disabilities through Employment Support” and “Solving Future Skills Challenges in the Danube Region”. Two Stakeholder Conferences were organised: “The Future of Work: A World of New and Changing Skills” and “Building Partnerships for Future Skills”.

The following projects addressing labour market and skills issues were implemented:

## **“Strengthening Social Innovation and Entrepreneurial Spirit of Secondary School Students by Using a Highly-Innovative Learning System” (InnoSchool).**

The general objective of “InnoSchool” is to strengthen the social innovation and entrepreneurial spirit of high school students by developing, testing and introducing an innovative learning system. Thus, InnoSchool combines new and attractive elements

focussing on adolescents not only to increase their interest in learning, but also to optimise the entire education system. The first specific objective of InnoSchool is to increase the attractiveness of learning for high school students through a series of adaptation to the curriculum in order to develop social innovation and entrepreneurship skills.

The second specific objective is to improve the knowledge of education, economic and social stakeholders and also that of decision makers about the use of this innovative learning system. The third objective is to strengthen the foundation of education by implementing the "InnoSchool" approach within high school curricula.

### **"Fostering Entrepreneurship of Young Women in the Danube Region"**

The project aims to encourage young women with innovative business concepts to launch and successfully develop their own businesses. The main activities focus on:

- Market analyses and feasibility studies;
- Improving policies and programmes to support female entrepreneurship at regional levels by developing a common policy agenda;
- Development of innovative training programs to improve cultural awareness, skills and competencies of young female entrepreneurs;
- Realisation of four pilot consulting centres for female entrepreneurs. The project is implemented by a consortium of 14 partners from nine countries in the Danube Region and brings together national and regional organisations (both public and private), as well as universities.

## **"Fostering Innovation in the Danube Region through Knowledge Engineering and IPR Management" (KnowING IPR).**

The KnowING IPR project aims to improve the framework for innovation in the Danube Region, providing an open access tool for advanced intellectual property rights (IPR) analysis. It ensures wider access to existing research innovation and results and includes services and training for IPR management and supports the commercialisation of research results and technology transfer.

The KnowING IPR project consists of a regional consortium including partners from the following countries: Slovenia, Slovakia, Croatia, Czechia, Bulgaria, Romania, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine.

The project partners aim to achieve the following results:

- Establishment of a map of IPR challenges for the Danube Region;
- Design of an IPR Action Plan in the Danube Region;
- Development of a KnowING Hub;
- Capacity building through interactive learning;
- Formulation of IPR policy recommendations.

In the future, PA9 will continue to promote investment in people, in their education and training, skills, creativity, and capacity to innovate.

In particular, PA 9 is going to focus on: promoting innovative active labour market measures, developing digital skills in order to avoid digital divide in the Danube Region labour market, implementing targeted measures/projects for better inclusion of vulnerable groups, diversification of social services for people at risk of poverty, strengthening vocational education and training (VET); promoting lifelong learning, and enhancing access to quality and inclusive education. ●

## The Network of ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region – a Success Story

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### Background

In October 2015, the ministers in charge of EU funds, European Affairs and European Integration from the participating States and Regions of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) reinforced the need for closer cooperation and coordination between European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) and EU programmes on the one hand, and on the other hand, the governance of the EUSDR in their Joint Statement<sup>5</sup>. In this spirit, the first meeting of ESF Managing Authorities (MA) in the Danube Region was organised on the 28th of October 2015 as a supplemental event of the 4th Annual Forum of the EUSDR in Ulm. The aim of the meeting was to network, to initiate a brainstorming activity for discussion as well as to find out how and in which fields the ESF MAs and the EUSDR (especially the respective Priority Areas 9 “People and Skills” and 10 “Institutional Capacity and Cooperation”) could cooperate.

In view of the funding period 2021-2027, the regulatory proposals of the European Commission further encourage embedding of the Macro-Regional Strategies, like the EUSDR, in the ESIF programmes. The current preparation phase of the ESF Operational Programmes in the participating States and Regions of the EUSDR provides a unique opportunity to benefit from one another as much as possible. Therefore, the overall objective of the Network of ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region is to make both the ESF (European Social Fund)/ESF+ (European Social Fund Plus) and the EUSDR more efficient by enabling transnational cooperation to accelerate the transfer of, and the facilitation of scaling of innovative solutions, particularly in employment, skills and social inclusion, across the Danube Region.

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<sup>5</sup> Joint Statement of the Ministers in charge of EU Funds, European Affairs and European Integration, 29/10/2015.



## How will the ESF+ tackle the challenges of social cohesion?

Till the last funding period (2014-2020), the European Social Fund (ESF) was the main instrument in supporting employment. Local, regional, and national employment-related projects throughout Europe were funded by ESF: from small projects ran by neighbourhood charities to help local disabled people find suitable work to nationwide projects that promoted vocational training among the entire population.

The new European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) will remain the main EU instrument for investing in people with the focus on tackling the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ESF+ Regulation supports the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, jointly proclaimed by the Council, the European Parliament, and the Commission as the EU's compass for responding to social challenges in Europe. (see <https://ec.europa.eu/european-social-fund-plus/en> for more information)

The ESF+ will focus on:

- **Supporting the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and the implementation of recommendations under the European Semester:**

The ESF+ will continue to tackle unemployment, poverty, and exclusion by supporting job seekers, the poor, the marginalised and the deprived. The ESF+ will also remain the main EU instrument investing in policy and system reforms to enhance peoples' skills and education levels, including digital skills to better equip them for the changing labour market.

- **Providing a helping hand to youth:**  
Member States with a NEET rate above the Union average in 2019 will be required to dedicate a certain percentage of ESF+ allocations to targeted actions and structural reforms to support youth employment.
- **Supporting EU actions for social innovation, mobility, and health:**  
The ESF+ will offer the opportunity to test innovative solutions, will support labour mobility in Europe and will help to modernise healthcare systems in the Member States.

## **How do macro-regional strategies link to ESF+ programming?**

Macro-regional strategies set out policy objectives in specifically-defined geographic areas that should be considered by ESIF programmes and, vice versa; every national Operational Programme shall set out macro-regional strategies (see Article 17 – Common Provisions Regulation 2021-2027 (COM (2018) 375 final), in our case the EUSDR and the respective Priority Areas:

- **PA9 “Investment in People and Skills”**  
Priority Area 9 focuses on policies and actions in the fields of education and training, labour market and marginalised communities. In this respect, the European Pillar of Social Rights, supporting quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning, quality employment and social inclusion plays a key role.
- **PA10 “Institutional Capacity and Cooperation”**  
Priority Area 10 addresses institutional capacity building at local, regional, and national levels; involvement of civil society in public governance; increasing local development and better resource allocation.

## **What is our vision?**

Our vision is to find common ground for ESF-relevant policy proposals to develop and establish state-of-the-art policies in labour market policy, governance and social inclusion that take into account macro-regional dynamics and interdependencies in the Danube Region. On that basis, it should be possible to realise more competent and reliable transnational partnerships

## **How to achieve this?**

**Networks need to be coordinated;** therefore, PA9 and PA10 – in cooperation with all managing authorities – function as a coordination unit to organise one or two meetings per year to guarantee constant information exchange. The Network of ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region is a common platform for coordination and information.

Not only does the network itself have to be coordinated, but **transnational project promoters also have to be facilitated**, for example through partner search forums, peer reviews or good practice platforms.

## **What have we achieved so far?**

The establishment of the Network itself is one of our most important achievements. We were able to stabilise the Network of ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region by:

- achieving both a common understanding and a common vision concerning the embedding of transnational cooperation into the ESF+,
- creating a platform for (informal) know-how transfer,
- enabling dissemination of good practice.

The management of transnational cooperation within ESF activities was an all-encompassing theme of the network meetings. Approaches in the discussions varied given the diverse perspectives, but always focused on what the most important preconditions were for transnational components which needed to be considered to achieve success.

They included:

### **Defining common topics for transnational cooperation**

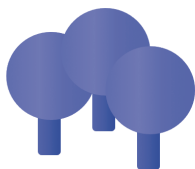
The ESF network had to clarify which topics were relevant for most, or all, of the participating management authorities. This agreement on the common thematic focus is a precondition for each attempt of transnational cooperation. The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) plays a central role in both the EUSDR and the ESF+. Based on the defined goals of the EPSR and the discussions in the network meetings, the following common topics for future cooperation within the Danube Region were identified:

- the ageing population
- inclusion of vulnerable groups / Roma inclusion
- digitalisation
- life-long learning
- social entrepreneurship
- social innovation
- vocational training
- women in the labour market

## 2016 Munich

### 2nd Meeting of the ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region

- ✓ Establishing cooperation with EUSDR PA 9 „People & Skills“ & PA 10 „Institutional Capacity“
- ✓ Exchanging on common topics & technical implementation of transnational cooperation in ESF



## 2015 Ulm

### Joint Statement of Ulm on Embedding 2014-2020

### 1st Meeting of the ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region

- ✓ to coordinate & accompany the embedding process



## 2017 Vienna

### 3rd Meeting of the ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region

- ✓ Transnational Cooperation in ESF OPs 2014-2020 (incl. lessons learned from the Baltic Sea): collaborative project platforms, partner search, support from MAs & EUSDR to project promoters



## 2018 Bratislava

### 4th Meeting of the ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region

- ✓ Lessons learnt from the transnational Danube Call in ESF Bulgaria (OP Human Resources)
- ✓ Exchange on transnational cooperation in ESF+ 2021–2027 with DG EMP



## 2020 Vienna + Online

### 6th & 7th Meeting of the ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region

- ✓ Defining common EUSDR-related topics for ESF+ OPs
- ✓ Exchanging on technical questions in the implementation of TNC
- ✓ Defining next steps for exchange



## 2019 Sofia

### 5th Meeting of the ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region

- ✓ Defining joint vision & tasks for EUSDR embedding in programming & implementation phase of ESF+ 2021-2027
- ✓ Drafting provision on EUSDR/transnational coop. for ESF OPs



## 2021 Online

### 8th & 9th Meeting of the ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region

- ✓ Text Modul ESF+ OPs
- ✓ Exchange status quo or Programming
- ✓ Topics for transnational cooperation

### **Clarifying the concrete definitions of the selected topics**

Because the countries participating in the EUSDR have quite differing histories in the fields of the respective policies for labour market development, employment promotion, measures to fight unemployment, education and other areas relevant to the ESF+, it was not a given that the concrete meanings of the selected topics (and the related practices) were congruent in all countries involved in the ESF+ network. It was therefore necessary in the network meeting discussions to clearly define the above-mentioned topics. This clarification will facilitate transnational cooperation in ESF projects.

### **Lessons learnt from the Danube Region – Experiences within Transnational Calls**

The Human Resource Development Operational Programme 2014 – 2020 Bulgaria had unique status in the Danube Region because transnational cooperation was a priority (PA4) and all project submissions with a specific focus on the Danube Strategy got extra points.

The first call was launched in 2017 and 11 of 23 submitted projects were approved. On the one hand, Bulgaria had positive experiences while realising a transnational call, on the other hand beneficiaries had to face some challenges like searching for the right partners, no coordinated timing under the flexible approach or missing funding by the foreign partner (orphan projects). Thematically, the projects focused on NEETs, Roma issue and administrative capacity.

### **A common vision**

Based on this combined experience and the discussions in the network meetings, a Vision Paper to support better alignment of funding and smooth implementation of transnational cooperation within the ESF in the Danube Region was drafted and adopted by all partners. It sets out the general vision of the network and the mission, including concrete steps to be taken and topics to be addressed.

## **The EUSDR's opportunities to support ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region**

As a structure for macro-regional collaboration and coordination, the EUSDR – especially in the context of PA9 and PA10 - not only addresses several actions that match the thematic priorities of the ESF, but also provides structures to address and mobilise stakeholders and project development that can be used to strengthen transnational cooperation in the ESF in the Danube Region.

### **Aligning ESF+ with EUSDR: Drafting a common text module for transnational cooperation for the ESF Operational Programmes**

A draft text module was prepared in accordance with Annex V of COM (2018) 375 final and refers to the support of transnational cooperation through other ESF+ projects or partners/beneficiaries. The text includes a description of the benefits of transnational cooperation and examples of activities that contribute to this action as well as a concrete reference to the EUSDR and a clear link to the ESF MA Network in the Danube Region. The aim of the text module is to implement a common wording in the national Operational Programmes for transnational ESF+ activities.

### **The Network of ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region – a Success Story**

The ESF network is the first network of ESIF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region. Since its establishment, the ESF MA network has held nine meetings in different countries of the Danube Region or online.

With time, the network has gradually and systematically improved; this ranges from the discussion of concrete examples/projects and challenges and opportunities in the implementation of transnational cooperation within the ESF up to the identification of common topics and, subsequently, the definition of joint text modules related to the EUSDR/transnational cooperation in the upcoming MFF 2021-27. ●

## Marginalised Groups in the Danube Region

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One of the topics that immediately springs to mind when talking about the Danube Region is the question of how to include marginalised communities and – more specifically – groups such as the Roma population. Starting in 2011, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) commences at the same time as another key EU initiative, the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, which was comprised of four main areas: employment, education, health, and housing. This initiative with its respective national frameworks aimed at fighting discrimination. According to the RARE project – a project of the Danube Transnational Programme which addresses inclusion of the Roma and changing the discourse about them – 5.2 million Roma live in the Danube Region, which in terms of size equals a medium-sized country.

On October 7th 2020, the European Commission issued a reinforced and reformed EU Roma strategic framework, which initiated a comprehensive three-pillar approach. This approach complements the socio-economic inclusion of marginalised Roma by fostering equality and promoting participation. All Roma should have the opportunity to realise their full potential and engage in political, social, economic and cultural life. On March 12th 2021, the Council of the European Union adopted a recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation in all Member States. Likewise, the Regional Cooperation Council – representing the Western Balkan Countries – also issued national policy recommendations with regard to Roma integration.

While the recommendations demonstrate a relationship between the national governments, the Council of the EU and the European Commission, the EUSDR can contribute additional international and regional platforms for working together in the field of the inclusion of Roma. This is done e.g., by organising international seminars and conferences, contributing to international project development and collaborating within the framework of the Managing Authorities' Network of the European Social Fund (ESF). Some of the fourteen countries of the Danube Region have



integrated Roma Inclusion into their programming of EU funds and hence projects were implemented and are also going to be realised in the future.

Already in October 2015, Priority Area 9 “People and Skills”, together with Priority Area 10 “Institutional Capacity” of the EUSDR had organised a strategic conference in Vienna, bringing together different representatives from the European Commission (DG Employment, DG Justice, DG Regio), from the National Coordinators of the EUSDR and the National Roma Integration Strategies, as well as representatives from the civil society and local authorities. This cross-sectorial multi-level governance approach has paved the way for a multitude of collaborations, especially in the framework of the Danube Participation Days – an annual conference for civil society actors in the Danube Region – within which a working group addressing marginalised groups was successfully established.

In addition to the large-scale EU projects and the increasing consideration of Roma within EU policy making, what needs to be considered in the Danube Region are the manifold small-scale initiatives of NGOs and smaller funds of such organisations as the Baden-Württemberg or ERSTE foundations. These initiatives are very often driven by highly-motivated private individuals who deserve a lot of respect. Against this background, the EUSDR as a strategy has the potential to establish strong relationships between different projects, programmes, and policies. This is also necessary as the inclusion of marginalised groups in the Danube Region necessitates an integrated approach. For instance, a geographically segregated settlement might need a road leading to the school, the school needs qualified teachers who themselves should be aware of the pupils’ specific learning and life skills needs etc. This means that the question of the integration of marginalised communities in the Danube Region is not only a social one, but also follows territorial patterns (see picture below) – for instance, in some countries such as Austria or Germany, the risk of poverty and social exclusion is more prevalent in cities, whereas in other countries, it is much higher in the countryside (e.g., Romania and Bulgaria).



Tufanu, an informal settlement in Romania

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In the framework of the EUSDR, Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” integrated the inclusion of marginalised groups into the Action Plan (SWD(2020) 59 final), which was then adopted in 2020. This means that the integration of marginalised groups is one of the core tasks of the Strategy. The Action Plan states that “[...] one third of the EU population at risk of poverty lives in the Danube Region. Roma communities, of whom 80% live in the region, suffer not only from poverty and substandard living conditions, but are also exposed to social and economic exclusion.” Priority Area 9 has thereby ensured that this topic remains at the heart of the Strategy, and that those communities who also feel closely connected to the Danube Region as a whole both in cultural and historical terms are truly considered. Two of the eight actions of Priority Area 9 are directly dedicated to this topic, action 3 “Integration of Vulnerable Groups into the Labour Market” and action 4 “Fighting Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion for All”.

## Conclusions

Without any doubt, more needs to be done to overcome inequality, and the political efforts have so far only had limited success in combating poverty in the Danube Region. However, the EUSDR and Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” can do their bit when it comes to a necessary and complex coordination task, e.g., coordination of funding, projects, and policies and, not least, it can provide integration policies with a transnational dimension that is certainly needed considering mobility and migration flows, as well as the shared challenges and opportunities. Moreover, in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, the situation of the Roma population has deteriorated, and they have often been the victims of (even more) discrimination and scapegoating.

For the future activities of Priority Area 9, a long-term and smart approach is going to be needed, which takes into consideration what has been achieved so far and what is required in the future. This demands not only true commitment from the entire EUSDR governance, but also an understanding of the EUSDR’s potential for the future by the stakeholders outside the Strategy. ●

## **Expert Academies for Labour Market Policy – A Successful Practice of Cross-Border Know-How Exchange in the Danube Region**

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### **Introduction**

The Austrian Federal Ministry (Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Economics) initiated and established the expert academies in labour market policy in cooperation with the project leader in the field of social science, L&R Social Research, in order to link the labour markets of the Austrian border regions with their counterparts in the Central Europe, to exchange experiences with regards to modern instruments and methods, as well as to prepare the labour market institutions to join the European Union. These initiatives of cross-border labour market policy were active from 2001 onwards for 15 years and took the shape of cross-border Interreg projects and hence were funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), i.e. the EU, the Austrian Federal Ministry of Labour and its counterparts in the neighbouring countries.

The establishment of a systematic cross-border structure of the respective border regions (in cooperation with the superordinate institutions of the central state) should enable the development of common labour market strategies and joint operations. These bilateral cooperation programmes were designated expert academies, since they emerged out of the cooperation of labour market experts.

These expert academies were implemented as multiannual cross-border projects during the 15 years mentioned above between Austria and its neighbours Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia, respectively. Following the same scheme, a collaboration with Croatia took place, too – both before and after this country joined the EU on 1 July 2013. All the participating states are also active in the framework of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region since 2011. On a regional level, expert academies were implemented in Vienna, Burgenland, Lower Austria, Southern Bohemia, Southern Moravia, Carinthia, Western Slovakia, Western Hungary, and the Slovenian region bordering Austria. In the

framework of the Austrian-Croatian collaboration it was mainly the central labour market authority that was active, however with the involvement of the Croatian counties (županije).

### **Challenges of cross-border labour market policy**

The complex situation on the labour market and in the field of employment on several levels in the above-mentioned border regions was related to challenges of the cross-border labour market policy: In all the relevant Slovak, Hungarian, Czech and Slovenian regions, long-term unemployed, young people and underqualified unemployed were among the main target groups of the respective labour market policy, which complies to a certain extent with the Austrian approach. In this context, the common interest of all the regions participating in the expert academies was to establish effective instruments to integrate the target groups of labour market policy into the labour market.

Back then (and still today), one of the key aspects was the development of specific offers for continuing education, including mainly professional orientation, fostering social competences, imparting expertise and stabilizing the fitness for work. For the majority of the border region of Austria's neighbour countries involved in the expert academies, these approaches were new.

All of the participating regions also had to extend and deepen the collaboration with non-profit institutions of the relevant parts of the Tertiary Sector (services). In this context, for the labour market institutions, the Austrian experience was very important to establish a sustainable basis for collaboration between state institutions and private non-profit organisations.

Following the EU accession of Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia and Slovenia on the 1 May 2004, the opportunities for cross-border commuting gradually grew as did for the permanent employment in the 'old' EU Member States such as Austria. This also led to additional challenges for the labour market services in the respective border regions. For instance, the communication regarding work permits, employment conditions, qualification needs and the comparison of job profiles needed to be intensified and systematized.

For the New Member States, it was the successful use of EU funding that was at the heart of the collaboration. Especially the capacity building for using the European Social Fund (ESF) was

vital at the time. One of the thematic focuses of the cross-border labour market cooperation was labour force migration.

In Austria's neighbouring countries, the relatively unstable institutional pre-conditions turned out to be a specific problem. After the end of communism, the Central and Eastern European countries had to build new structures for their labour market policy, in order to ensure that the efforts for fostering and securing employment are advanced effectively.

Western European countries had the advantage of stable labour market bureaucracies and institutions with a lot of continuity. Against this background, labour market institutions in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe demonstrated a much higher exposure to politics, resulting in a high fluctuation in the management, but also in new concepts coming with each governmental change. Rather than being implemented on the basis of experiences, these concepts were realized as experiments.

Twenty years ago, in the Czech, Slovak, Hungarian and Slovenian border regions with Austria, the stabilization of labour market institutions was one of the main challenges, which resulted in the following main tasks for the cross-border cooperation:

- Information about the approaches and experiences of the western European and other modern labour market policies that can be seen as inspirations for own programmes and structures – considering that due to the lack of financial resources and incompatible structures.
- Establishment of a sustainable regional network, that can identify common approaches and interests that are relevant for the integration of the entire region – despite its differences in terms of development. Establishment of low threshold steering strategies.
- Pilot projects as a test bed for the collaboration and create a basis of practical experience.

During the first year of the expert academies, the main focus was to support the border regions in their modernisation processes. With their EU accession, this basis for collaboration was used to harmonise interests and policy requirements and possibly use it for a joint action.

## Expert Academies as models for cross-border labour market policy

The expert academies provided the stakeholders of labour market and regional policies in Austria's neighbouring countries but also increasingly in some countries of Southeast Europe with information as well as the opportunity for discussions and networking. Very quickly, they became a well-recognised forum for bilateral cooperation between Austria and Hungary, Czechia, Slovenia and Slovakia. They developed into an institutional context of learning that was well-known far beyond the border regions. This platform also gained in significance as it was used by the national governments for exchange and harmonisation in the field of labour market policy.

In this context, the broad scope of stakeholders of the expert academies proved to be useful: Their wide range of offers was targeted at the managers and employees of the Austrian Labour Market Service and the Labour Market administrations in Austria's neighbour countries (especially from the border regions), the social partners, the national, regional and local administrative units, labour market policy stakeholders, as well as representatives of research and development, private organisations and firms on both sides of the border, respectively. Moreover, experts from other countries that were not directly involved, from the European Commission or international organisation such as the OECD participated.

The expert academies had the following main foci, which corresponded to their principal tasks:

- Conception, discussion and implementation of labour market and regional policy programmes and measures that were new or tried and tested in the European Union;
- Improvement and intensification of the communication and collaboration between the political, administrative, economic, social partnership and civil society stakeholders in the respective border region;
- Development of needs-based (cross-border) programmes and measures, especially with a view to reducing unemployment and creating jobs.

In the following, selected activities are used to show how these challenges were addressed within the framework of the expert academies.

## **Complex activities**

The cross-border activities of the expert academies were – in accordance with the constantly changing requirements – complex and multi-layered. In the following, those activities are outlined that were either equally important for several expert academies or that were relevant as pilot projects for testing new and innovative forms of cooperation.

### **Cross-border Labour Market Conferences**

Throughout the duration of the projects (usually four to six years), annual labour conferences were held in the framework of each of the expert academies. These took place in cities with regional significance such as Brno, Szombathely and Bratislava. These conferences enabled a broad specialist discussion of current and future-oriented labour market issues and thereby offered an inventory of regional, national and European approaches and strategies.

In this way, the positions of the various institutions relevant for labour market policy could be clarified and suitable approaches to cooperation could be found.

The first of these conferences took place in Szombathely, western Hungary, in 1995. The labour market conferences in western Hungary, which subsequently took place annually and were the nucleus of the following expert academies, usually lasted three days and, in addition to professional exchange, included relevant project visits as well as social and cultural exchange. In some cases, trilateral meetings were held, for example the Hungarian-Slovakian-Austrian labour market conference in 2009. On average, 150 to 200 experts took part in a conference.

In view of the lively professional participation and the respective current issues, these conferences were among the most important events in cross-border cooperation in Central Europe, which means that their importance also extends beyond the actual policy field. Many projects and programs that were implemented in the respective border regions emerged from one of these conferences.

In the years before and after Austria's neighbouring countries joined the European Union, the conferences were dominated by European labour market issues. The conference titles included, for example:



- Think and work European – on the home stretch towards the European Union;
- Solidarity in a wider Union – aspiration and reality;
- Reintegrating women into the labour market: employment and family;
- Elderly people in the labour market;
- Professional qualification put to the test;
- Creating new jobs together - opportunities in the enlarged European Union;
- Education and training for a prosperous economy with attractive jobs;
- A career without barriers – equal opportunities for people with disabilities;
- Fit for Europe – professional development.

In addition to the opportunity to discuss current labour market and employment policy issues with national and international experts, these conferences also served the purpose of a meeting point for political decision-makers. In 2005, for example, the Austrian Minister of Labour Martin Bartenstein met his Hungarian counterpart Gábor Csizmár and the Hungarian Minister for Youth, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities Kinga Göncz). In 2009 the Austrian-Slovenian Labour Market Conference in Klagenfurt enabled a meeting between the Austrian labour minister Rudolf Hundstorfer and his Slovenian counterpart Ivan Svetlik.

### **Information, development, networking, seminars and workshops**

Just as important a role as the conferences were information, development and networking events that were held around three to four times a year in each bilateral project. In this context, the participants were informed about changes in the labour markets close to the border, in the labour market and employment policy of the respective countries involved, in the structures of the respective labour market services, but also about new developments at European level.

These seminars mostly lasted two days and workshops were designed to be flexible and offered the opportunity for special consultations and advice. They were occasionally combined with excursions and visits to relevant labour market projects.

The most important policy fields of this form of cross-border cooperation were:

- **Models of temporary work:** Through information about the legal regulations for temporary workers and the presentation of successful models, opportunities and problems in this area of labour market policy were identified and discussed.
- **Labour market programs for elderly people – good practice in the European Union:** In addition to the European employment policy for older employees, successful good practice models from Austria and other EU Member States were presented.
- **Vocational orientation and vocational training:** exchange of information about successful models of professional orientation and training programs in this context.
- **Quality assurance in the Austrian labour market service and the labour market institutions of the respective partner countries or regions:** The exchange of experience in this context served to establish a quality assurance system in the labour market institutions of partner countries involved in the expert academies.
- **Cross-border networking of facilities for disadvantaged people:** Through mutual excursions and information exchange, the facilities of this type were informed about different methods of care and target group-specific employment. In some cases, these activities also led to the development of new organizations for the disadvantaged.
- **Administration of the European Social Fund (ESF)** for employees of the labour market services, who were responsible for implementing the ESF. As a rule, the higher-level departments or ministries were also included here.
- Content-related exchange of experience and structured opportunities for cooperation about cross-border **employment pacts**.
- **Labour migration** was a topic of particular importance for all border regions and, in view of the imminent or completed accession to the European Union, also associated with an increased need for cross-border coordination. In this context, Austria was also prepared for the effects of the full opening of domestic labour markets, with a focus on preventing wage dumping.

A direct practical approach in the area of these networking activities were the internships organized by experts from the labour market services close to the border as part of the Austrian-Czech Expert Academy. Among their core tasks was international exchange of information and know-how. In 2006, several EURES (Information System of the European Employment Services) advisers from the Czech labour market offices in the Brno region, České Budějovice and Znojmo completed a four-day internship at the Labour Market Service of Lower Austria. The focus of these internships was the clarification of relevant questions about the employment of Czech citizens in Austria, in particular the procedure of the employment permit. A year later, the Austrian EURES advisers made a visit to selected Czech employment offices.

In all expert academies, the establishment and development of a tertiary sector that is relevant to labour market policy (also known as the non-profit sector or “second labour market”) was key. The model were the civil society institutions established in the western EU countries since the 1970s. They were (and are) mostly organized as associations and are employed or commissioned by the labour market services in various areas of active labour market policy, e.g. for the qualification of long-term unemployed, in job creation for disadvantaged people and minorities, the employment of elderly people with few opportunities in the primary labour market and for the reintegration of women after a long absence from the labour market.

Austria's neighbour countries had very limited experience in the collaboration with non-profit organisations at that time, which made this topic even more crucial. The tertiary sector was indispensable for the new programmes in the field of active labour market policy in order to achieve a critical mass and thus the desired effectiveness. The accession to the European Union made this even more relevant, because only with the help of the Tertiary Sector the programmes of the European Social Fund (ESF) could be brought to the border regions and be implemented there.

The expert academies contributed to the development of non-profit organizations in the field of active labour market policy in the border region. This happened, for example, by imparting basic knowledge, conducting research on existing institutions, and helping with the conception of pilot projects as well as the

identification of potential employment opportunities in the institutions of the tertiary sector.

### **Pilot project cross-border job placement**

A pilot project of the Austrian-Czech expert academy could demonstrate which possibilities existed for the placement of Czech workers for vacancies in the border regions of Lower Austria. These were exclusively jobs that could not be filled with Austrians for a long time.

In this context, particular attention was paid to the cooperation between the regional offices of the Employment Service in the regions of Wein- und Waldviertel and their respective counterparts in South Moravia and the South Bohemian border area. EURES was also involved in this pilot project. The pilot project was carried out by the regional office of the Lower Austrian Employment Service and received scientific advice from the Austrian-Czech Expert Academy.

### **Consulting the cross-border commuter agreement between Austria and the Czech Republic**

Cross-border commuter agreements between Austria and its neighbouring countries enabled them to employ a certain number of workers on the Austrian labour market for a limited period. After the successful and long-year experience of the cross-border commuter agreement between Austria and Hungary, it had not been possible to conclude one between the Czech Republic and Austria for a long time. With the help of the cooperation network of the Austrian-Czech Expert Academy, the implementation of the cross-border commuter agreement with this neighbouring country could be finalized. It came into effect in 2006.

### **Centre for Roma in Nagykanizsa (Hungary)**

The support in terms of consulting and conceptualisation of the Roma Centre in Nagykanizsa in the Hungarian county of Zala was one of the multi-year projects of the Austro-Hungarian Expert Academy. At that time, the Roma Centre was a multifunctional institution supported by all regional and local institutions (municipalities, regional labour office, city administration, social partners, Roma self-government) with the aim of increasing the labour market and life opportunities of the Roma minority.

As part of the expert academy, workshops and work meetings were held, a planning group was founded and a concept for increasing the quality of the activities of the centre was worked

out together. With the help of these measures, the different service branches of the centre could be stabilised and thus a basis for the sustainability and the expansion of the offers of this organization could be created.

The umbrella organization of Hungarian Roma women in Nagykanizsa was also supported in this collaboration. The overarching goal of these efforts was to develop a centre for equal opportunities in order to open up the range of services also for other disadvantaged groups.

### **Research projects within the framework of the expert academies**

To prepare the various activities of the expert academies, research and analyses were carried out, above all to secure the more innovative components of cross-border cooperation.

In the field of labour market cooperation at the Austrian-Czech border regions, the research in 2005 focussed on the analysis of the pilot project for cross-border labour placement carried out by the Lower Austrian labour market service: With the help of the results of the scientific monitoring, the implementation progress was assessed and suggestions for the further development were made. The question of the quality of the employment relationships that had been filled with Czech workers as part of the pilot project also played an important role in this context.

Another research focus related to the analysis of the “qualification needs in the border region of Lower Austria”. The aim of this study was to create a systematically researched and evaluated information base on supply and demand in the field of professional qualifications in the Lower Austrian border regions.

Furthermore, the research activities concerned the corporate strategies in connection with the increasing cross-border integration, the tertiary sector in the labour market and the situation of women in the border regions.

### **Introduction to the evaluation methods in the field of labour market policy**

The subject of methods for the performance evaluation of measures of active labour market policy was addressed in many activities of the expert academies. In the cooperation with Croatia, it was an explicit focus. At the beginning of its cooperation with Austria (2010), the Croatian Public Employment Service only had a poor overview of the benefits of its measures

in the area of active labour market policy. The head office suspected that the successes in this regard differed greatly from one region to another.

To check this, a both practical and realistic evaluation on selected service areas should be conducted. The Croatian Public Employment Service also wanted to use this pilot project to prepare for accession to the European Union and to use appropriate methods to demonstrate the added value of using the subsidies of EU funds.

For the practical instruction in the methods of labour market policy impact analyses, a study was designed and carried out in which the data on selected measures were collected, analysed and compared. The research team was made up of experts from the Croatian labour market administration and from the project executing agency L&R Social Research. In this way, the Croatian experts were able to acquire practical knowledge in all steps that are relevant in an evaluation.

The results were presented and discussed in a workshop lasting several days, from which instructions for the methodical use of evaluations were developed, translated into Croatian and made available to the regional and central offices of the Croatian labour market administration. The overall performance in this context was an absolute novelty for Croatian labour market policy and can therefore be seen as the start for systematic evaluations in this policy area.

### **Special topic: Shortage of skilled workers**

The shortage of skilled workers, which was already a pressing problem for the economy in all of the border regions participating in the expert academies, had a special position in connection with all cross-border cooperation. The related events focussed on the following topics:

- Planning of innovative measures of professional orientation to steer the choice of profession related to qualification needs on the job market.
- Collaboration Methods between vocational and secondary schools with companies and labour market services: new training methods, information for students.
- Joint development of measure concepts to increasingly place women and older jobseekers in demanded professions

(preparation through studies and evaluation of existing analysis).

- Evaluation of subsidies for women working in technical professions as a basis for the further development of concepts, methods and instruments.
- Planning of programmes to improve the social and professional integration of young adults of the second and third generation from migrant families.
- Development of labour market policy initiatives for minorities such as the Roma.
- Concepts to support companies in the training of their employees.

These contributions to enable the labour market services of the neighbouring countries to take proactive measures against the shortage of skilled workers, even if it was clear to all stakeholders that labour market policy instruments alone could not solve the explosive nature of the skills gap.

Therefore, the shortage of skilled workers is also a central focus in the EU Strategy for Danube Region. In this context, the main aim is to develop an effective overall strategy in this context by combining different policy approaches.

### **Public Relations**

The activities of the expert academies were supported by various public relations measures. These should on the one hand bring the benefits of this complex cross-border cooperation closer to a broader public, but also communicate the projects to an expert audience and encourage as many labour market experts as possible to participate.

Various types of media were created for this purpose, mostly in two languages, providing information on the developments in the respective expert academies:

- Brochures that describe the plans, goals, activities, partners and results;
- Documentation, in particular of the conferences and the development of the lead projects, either in book form (conferences), in the form of brochures (Roma Centre) or electronic files (seminar documentation);

- Development, updating and maintenance of a website as an information platform that covers all activities of the Austro-Hungarian Expert Academy ([www.expak.at](http://www.expak.at)).

In addition to these activities in the area of public relations, information efforts have also been made in some expert academies. This included, for example, the bilingual newsletter, which was published in both a print and an electronic version in the framework of the Austrian-Czech expert academy.

### **Added value for the EU Strategy for the Danube Region**

The long-term cooperation activities within the framework of the cross-border expert academies between Austria and its neighbouring states Hungary, the Czechia, Slovakia, Slovenia – more recently also with the involvement of Croatia – were particularly relevant to enable the labour market institutions to cooperate in the border regions. Moreover, they also prepared labour market policies in these countries for the successful participation in corresponding initiatives of the European Union. What has been tried out in the expert academies, above all on a bilateral level, has also benefited the involvement in the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region on a multilateral level since 2011, under completely different circumstances.

The specific added value of this systematic multilateral cooperation within the framework of European strategies was already inherent in the objectives of the expert academies. It was about the coordination within the framework of transnational labour market policy, about common learning, about the mutual alignment and adaptation of the labour market structures, the creation of cross-border information systems, the adjustment of data bases for comparative analyses, about the adoption of good practice models and ultimately about increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of the respective labour market regimes. These approaches are now also the subject of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region, which operates in a multilateral and multi-level governance context. ●



CLEMENS RAGL

ÖSB Consulting, Vienna

## Bilateral Cooperation and Exchange

The cooperation in labour market policy between Austria and Bulgaria (KOOP AT-BG) was launched in 2007, whereas the cooperation between Austria and Romania (KOOP AT-RO) was introduced in 2009. The main objectives of both projects were to establish networks between Austrian, Bulgarian and Romanian authorities and organisations which deal with labour market policy, exchanging and discussing of established solutions and best practices, as well as providing information on specific current issues in labour market policy.

A series of workshops, international conferences, round table meetings and study visits in Romania, Bulgaria and Austria as well as research and other activities dealing with issues related to labour market policy that were significant to those participating.

The beneficiaries, target groups and participants were representatives of ministries of labour, social affairs, of education and qualification, labour market services, national qualification institutes, representatives of regional administrations, trade unions and other employee and employer organisations, training and educational institutes and other labour market experts and consultants. The events and meetings were held not only in Sofia, Bucharest and Vienna, but also in Tsarevo, Smoljan and Plovdiv in Bulgaria, Râșnov in Romania as well as Linz in Austria, tailored to the respective thematic and regional focuses.

In addition to bringing together experts and political stakeholders from Austria, Romania and Bulgaria as well as representatives from the European Commission in various meeting formats, the project also created added value by communicating project activities to the interested public, e.g. through bilingual project brochures, regular newsletters in both languages, comparative studies, bilingual internet platforms, publications and minutes of the project meetings. The project provided a wide variety of valuable thematic input to the labour market policy stakeholders

in the participating countries. Discussion and exchange of ideas and good practice in the framework of project activities helped in finding new solutions to tackle existing labour market challenges.

### An Initiative of the Austrian Ministry of Labour

The projects were initiated and funded by the Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection of the Republic of Austria (currently called Federal Ministry of Labour), and they were implemented in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection of the Republic of Romania and other network partners. The project was carried out by ÖSB Consulting GmbH as the lead partner in cooperation with its branch office in Romania, with its Bulgarian partner organisation “Club Economika 2000”, as well as its Austrian partner organisations.

This initiative of the Austrian Ministry of Labour included not only cooperation activities with Bulgaria (KOOP AT-BG) and Romania (KOOP AT-RO), which are described here, but also an exchange with Poland (KOOP AT-PL), Estonia (KOOP AT-EE), Latvia (KOOP AT-LV), Lithuania (KOOP AT-LT) and Ukraine (KOOP AT-UA). All these projects were carried out from 2007 to 2012.

The objectives and project purposes of the above-mentioned cooperation were:

- development and improvement of the already-existing network of Bulgarian, Romanian and Austrian labour and social policy experts;
- facilitation of cooperation activities between the Austrian Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection and the Bulgarian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy as well as the Romanian Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection;
- exchange of knowledge about current labour market issues in Bulgaria, Romania and Austria; ongoing research to identify and develop thematic issues of mutual interest;
- planning and execution of thematic activities such as seminars, workshops, site visits, including dissemination of the results and outcomes;

- planning and execution of bilateral working meetings at ministerial levels in Austria, Bulgaria and Romania in order to further enhance the cooperation;
- development and preparatory work for future related projects;
- provide opportunities to exchange perspectives and experience, learn about different labour market policy measures and adapt or use them as examples or inspiration in specific contexts.

### KOOP AT-BG Project Highlights

- trilingual publication on “Active Labour Market Policies During and After the Economic Crisis: Experiences and Good Practices in Bulgaria and Austria”;
- seminar in Vienna on “Effects of the Economic Crisis on the Labour Markets”;
- seminar in Sofia on “Occupational Qualifications Focussing on Disadvantaged Persons”;
- conference in Sofia on “Flexicurity and its Practice in Austria and Bulgaria”;
- seminar in Plovdiv on “Equal Opportunities on the Labour Market Focussing on Mature Persons and Women”;
- workshop in Tsarevo on “Lifelong Learning and Adult Vocational Training Focussing on Labour Markets”;
- workshop in Smoljan on “Tourism and its Relevance to Labour Market Policies in Bulgaria and Austria”;
- conference in Sofia on “Europe 2020 Strategy and National Implementation of Labour Market Policies in Austria and Bulgaria”;
- workshop in Vienna on “Active Labour Market Policy Measures for Youth and Quality Control of Public Employment Services”;
- bilateral project with workshops to establish a “Virtual Qualification Network” between Austria and Bulgaria;

- bringing together high-level experts and participants from different labour market policy backgrounds (ministries, public employment services, EU institutions, qualification agencies and providers, social partnership institutions, NGOs, research institutions, private companies etc.).

#### KOOP AT-RO project highlights

- seminar in Vienna on „Strategies of Social Inclusion and Labour Market Policies“;
- workshop in Bucharest on „Experiences with the European Social Fund and the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund for Displaced Workers“;
- conference in Bucharest on „Strategies for the Inclusion of Disadvantaged Groups on the Labour Market“;
- seminar in Râșnov on „Strategies for the Reduction of Youth Unemployment. Experiences and Best Practice from Romania and Austria“;
- workshop in Linz on „Work foundation: Context, History, Functional Principles and Experiences in Austria“ with a study visit at „Steal Work Foundation“ and VOEST Alpine AG;
- seminar in Bucharest on „Employment of Persons with Special Needs“ with a study visit at „Protected Atelier“;
- bringing together high-level experts and participants from different labour market and social policy backgrounds.

#### **Relevance Within the Framework of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)**

The cooperation activities had strong relevance within the framework of the EUSDR, as the KOOP projects aimed at sharing knowledge, experience and strengthening of the participating regions to indirectly support their labour market development through investing in skills and qualifications and improving competitiveness.

The projects were primarily aimed at improving the cooperation between key stakeholders in labour and social policy in order to best tackle cross-sectoral policy issues (labour, social and educational policies) which are also strongly connected to demographic issues (ageing society, youth emigration, “brain drain” effects) in Bulgaria and Romania.

The KOOP projects aimed at creating a sustainable, durable and continuously-evolving network of relevant institutions and stakeholders in labour and social policies from Austria, Bulgaria and Romania in order to create additional expertise about then-ongoing labour market conditions in the relevant countries.

Furthermore, the projects provided dynamic and flexible platforms to research then-ongoing labour market developments in Austria, Romania and Bulgaria. They were also provided to the interested public, and served as an open forum for dialogue, exchange of experience with diverse labour market policies, and good practice models. ●

## Construction Academies in Southeast Europe: Pilot Projects in the Field of Dual Vocational Training

VIORICA CORLAT-TURCAN, WALTER REITER, IVANKA SPRINGER

Experts in Labour Market Policy

### Background

The countries in Southeast Europe suffer deeply from a huge lack of professional technically skilled workers. This shortage of skilled workers is especially a problem in the construction sector and one of the reasons for the slow development of the structural innovation in all fields of construction.

Because of this situation, the Austrian Development Agency (Department for Economic Partnerships) and the former Austrian Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection (now Ministry of Labour), co-financed so-called Construction Academies which was given the task to better qualify unemployed persons in the field of construction, or to upgrade existing skills of workers who had already been employed by construction companies. The second portion of the budgets for these qualification programmes were funded by Austrian construction companies active in the target countries. Smaller parts of project funding were financed via membership fees of local companies which were allowed to send their employees to the trainings.

These Construction Academies were established in Serbia, Croatia (before it joined the EU) and the Republic Moldova. This project ended in 2020. The Moldavian project was called “Vocational Centre Moldova” and was designated by the EU Strategy for the Danube Region as being a good practice example. Because of this success story, the model of the Construction Academies was also used for other sectors of the economy. In Moldova for example, a centre for qualification in the financial sector was established which used the same principles as the Vocational Centre Moldova (construction academy).

## 1

### **Basic Assumption: Dual Vocational Training Is a Successful Training Method for Adults, Especially in Construction**

The qualification courses of the Construction Academies were based on the principles of dual vocational training, which means that they comprised both theoretical and practical modules.

The basic assumption was that the dual vocational training approach was a successful qualification method in providing skilled workers and reducing unemployment, especially for youth. This was also a main objective of the Construction Academies; to support the partner countries with knowledge of how dual vocational training functions and how it is possible to establish such systems within regular vocational education systems.

This know-how transfer was of utmost urgency because most countries in Southeast Europe had no dual VET systems, education in vocational schools and colleges as well as trainings in the field of adult education were mainly theoretical and usually did not offer enough practical components. As a result, the graduates of vocational schools normally had difficulties in finding jobs because they did not receive any hands-on practical training. This led to a serious imbalance: on the one hand, the vocational school graduates very often remain unemployed, on the other hand, a huge shortage of skilled workers does prevail in many sectors of the economy. This lack of qualified personnel was quite troublesome for companies because they were not able to take on contracts or complete projects timely. This was, and still is, especially prevalent in the construction sector.

## 2

### **Construction Academies as Pilot Projects in the Construction Sector**

Construction Academies work as pilot projects to exemplify how dual vocational training works in practice. At the same time, they provide construction companies with qualified employees. Therefore, they focus on professions in the construction sector because this part of the economy particularly lacks skilled workers.

The main objectives of these qualification centres were:

- to demonstrate the methods of harmonisation between theoretical and practical elements in vocational training for the construction profession;
- to support the construction sector by qualifying skilled workers urgently needed on respective labour markets;
- to assist construction company employees in upgrading their skills;
- to provide basic qualification to the unemployed who want to work in the construction sector;
- to upgrade the skills of the unemployed who have already worked in the construction sector and who want to become in this sector;
- to support vocational education and training institutions (especially schools) in implementing dual vocational training methods as part of their education programme.

The realisation of these Construction Academies is only possible within broadly-based partnerships. The Croatian, Serbian and Moldavian pilot projects, for example, had the following institutions on board: Austrian and local construction firms, vocational schools, training centres, political institutions responsible for vocational education and adult training (e.g. ministries, municipalities, social partners, public employment services and research institutions).

### 3

#### **Establishment of the Construction Academies**

The establishment of all Construction Academies started with feasibility studies to clarify that the model of the construction academies was an appropriate instrument in supporting the construction industry with qualified personnel, and in introducing the system of dual vocational training in the target countries. It was necessary to find out if there was enough interest and motivation of potential partners (companies, education and training institutions, politically responsible decision makers, labour market agencies) to take part in these training programmes and to actively support them with their own means and know-how. These studies also had to specify the planning stages of the pilot projects.



These basic questions had to first be clarified in the feasibility study results. After funding institutions, as well as the involved Austrian companies handed over the contracts, the in-depth preparation of the respective Construction Academies could be started. The main steps of these preparations were:

- implementation of the organisational structures of the project partnerships and the implementation concepts;
- designing curricula;
- training the trainers;
- training of employees and unemployed;
- undertaking accompanying measures.

### 3.1

#### Implementation of the Organisational Structures of the Project Partnerships and the Implementation Concepts

In this stage, the organisational framework and a detailed concept for the implementation of the training programs were developed. It was necessary to define the organisational structure of the whole project, the designing of the necessary steps with respect to the qualification targets, the contribution and responsibilities of the involved partners as well as the management structure of the project. The choosing the theoretical and practical learning facilities was also part of the project preparation.

The selection of the member companies was especially important in this context and had two functions; their employees would be sent to Construction Academy trainings and their construction sites would be used to a certain extent to carry out practical trainings. For this reason, the selection of member companies was essential in preparing implementation. The membership rules were specified in contracts and contained specific requirements concerning the practical training on their construction sites.

The member companies were also able to suggest topics and professions for the trainings. Furthermore, they could nominate experts from their qualified staff to act as mentors.

Companies, vocational schools and public employment services were asked to designate appropriate experts (teachers, qualified employees or existing trainers) as participants in the train-the-trainer programmes.

After designing the in-depth concept for the realisation of the planned construction academies, all partners signed a contract outlining their responsibilities throughout the entire project. These contracts also contained a detailed implementation schedule.

### 3.2

#### Designing the Curricula

One of the main tasks of the feasibility study was to identify the most serious lacking skills in the construction sector of the respective countries. On that basis (including suggestions of member companies) the qualification needs were identified which were then incorporated into the training programmes of the Construction Academies.

The first step within this stage was the adaption and modernisation of existing curricula for the most sought-after professions (e.g., bricklayers, formwork builders and floor layers), according to the qualification needs of the construction industry. That was done in close cooperation with local member companies, an Austrian construction company as the lead project partner, the vocational education and training institutions, the project management and – if possible – with other experts.

After the evaluation of the existing training material, new curricula were developed and the drafts were again discussed with representatives from the above-mentioned institutions. In each Construction Academy soft skill training elements were included and hence also part of the curricula.

In all countries where Construction Academies were established, the final drafts of the curricula had to be submitted and approved by the responsible authorities (Ministries of Education).

### 3.3

#### Train the Trainers

One of the main functions of the Construction Academies as pilot projects was to familiarise vocational schools or training institutions with dual vocational methods of qualifying in the field of construction professions and to offer them these training services themselves. The problem in this regard was the lack of practically-qualified trainers and even the teachers of vocational schools had only limited practical knowledge in their respective fields. For this reason, a train-the-trainer programme had to also be included into the project.

Target groups in this context were mainly teachers of vocational schools and training institutions as well as employees of building companies who acted as on-site trainers and had to acquire or to upgrade their teaching competences.

On average, in each Construction Academy, according to the dual vocational method, thirty people were qualified to teach (combining theory and practice).

On average, the train-the-trainer element lasted forty days. The training modules covered occupational skills, modern theoretical skills, communication skills, conflict management, team building, didactic and planning skills.

Part of the Train-the-Trainer Programme was also the training of mentors in local member companies. On average, each Construction Academy had 15 to 20 member companies which sent their employees to upgrade their skills in their respective professions or to acquire basic skills in one of the required professions. Each company could send one person to the mentor trainings.

The Train-the-Trainer Programmes typically lasted ten days. The training topics included: supporting company trainees, knowledge transfer, collaboration with schools and training centres, communication and conflict management. At the end of their courses, all attendees of the mentor trainings received a manual which was created by the project team.

### 3.4

#### Training of Employees and the Unemployed

The core component of the qualification programmes provided by the Construction Academies were the dual vocational trainings in selected professions relevant to the needs of the construction industry in the respective target countries. There was an average of 150 to 300 trainees in one pilot project. The majority of these trainees was sent by the member companies. However, unemployed people having basic knowledge were also allowed attend the courses. Although the construction industry is predominantly male, there was a considerable number of female trainees (e.g., in Moldova for example approximately 30%). The training duration varied, ranging from one month to one year.

Training topics included:

- specific construction professions, e.g., bricklayers or frame carpenters;
- construction site management;
- social and communication skills;
- special skills for the old building renovation;
- new construction sector technologies.

All training subjects incorporated both theoretical and practical modules. Theoretical training was held in the participating vocational schools and other VET institutions. The practical qualification took place on member company premises, in VET centres (e.g., of the public employment service agencies) and, for specific expertise, also in one of the Austrian Building Academies.

To graduate, the trainees had to pass both theoretical and practical examinations. The certification was in alignment with corresponding laws of the target countries, and was recognised by the authorities in charge of dual vocational education.

### 3.5

#### Accompanying Measures

All Construction Academies not only carried out the above-mentioned qualification programmes, but also undertook three specific measures:

- supporting knowledge transfer of the dual vocational qualification methods to the labour market policy institutions and to the vocational education policies of the target countries;
- discussing the experiences and results of the Construction Academies within the interested professional public;
- informing the broader public about the cooperation between local institutions and the Austrian Development Agency as well as the Austrian Ministry of Labour.

The instruments used to achieve these objectives were workshops and seminars, study visits in Austria and expert meetings.

In the Moldavian Construction Academy these accompanying measures were financed by the former Austrian Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection (now Ministry of Labour).

## 4

### Experiences and Results

To secure results concerning the potential successes or failures of the Construction Academies, several evaluation methods were used during and upon completion of the projects.

The quantitative assessment was done according to the reporting requirements of the Austrian Development Agency (ADA). At this level, the project management had to verify that the planned outcomes were reached. The overall objectives in this context had to be proven especially according to the following indicators:

- the number of enterprises which benefited directly from the project;
- number of participants who benefited directly from the qualification services provided by the project;
- number of created and secured jobs.

Furthermore, the requirement of ADA contained specific criteria which measured the development of the projects during the implementation, and in the final results in all components of the programmes. A survey was part of specific measurement tools used among the participants (trained trainers, workers with upgraded qualification, unemployed with basic trainings) and a survey among the project partners and stakeholders (member companies, vocational schools, authorities).

All the evaluation results showed that the Construction Academies are a very successful concept in the field of qualifying skilled workers according to the needs of the building industry.

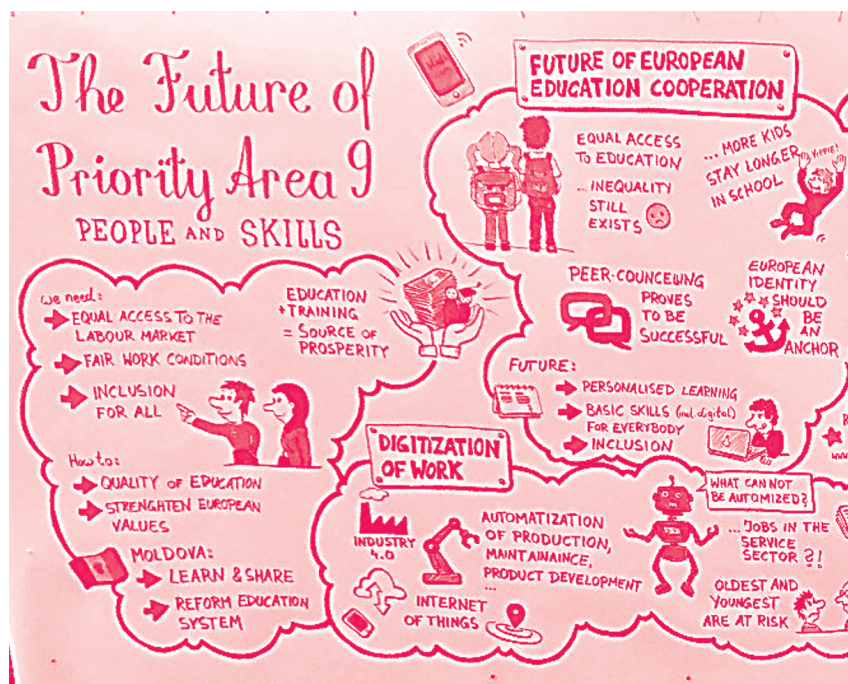
The following special experiences can be mentioned:

- The motivation and therefore the chances for successful graduation of the trainees – trainers as well as workers and unemployed people – were in average very high because of the good perspectives, either their new skills led to a better salary or they found a new job.
- The collaboration with the member companies was very good, because of the big part of the practical elements in the trainings. This meant that the upgraded skills of their workers were of immediate use in the services the member companies offered in their respective building markets.

- Graduates who were unemployed before they joined a training course had remarkably better chances to find a new job. Some of them were hired directly after the training by a member company.
- Construction Academies have a complex structure, that means they only can be implemented successfully if the commitment of the responsible regional and local institutions is guaranteed.

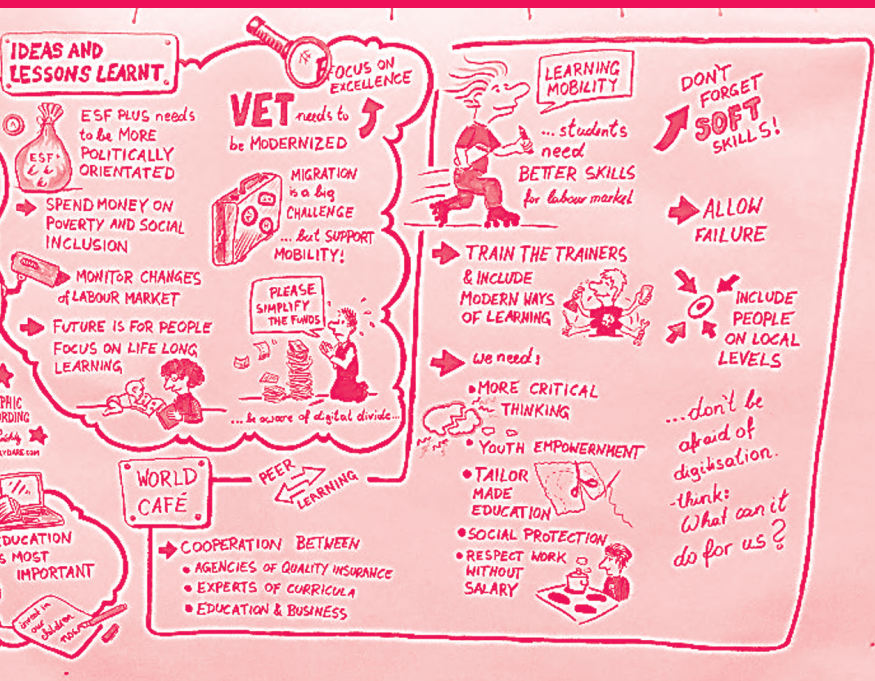
With their concepts of work-based learning according to the principles of dual vocational training these projects also had high relevance for the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region because all countries in the Danube area suffer from a huge shortage of skilled workers. Therefore, the vocational school system has to be supported by labour market-orientated and work-based training programmes like the construction academies. ●







# Education and Training



## Ten Years of EUSDR – the Importance of New Forms of Learning and Empowerment in Macro-Regional Cooperation in Education and Training

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With the endorsement of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) by the European Council on 24 June 2011, a new and important chapter in European cooperation has begun, in which Austria has been participating with great commitment from the very beginning. Back then, an economic and financial crisis had hit Europe in an unprecedented way and had amplified existing social and economic challenges. In all countries of the Danube Region, unemployment had risen, GDPs fallen, and industrial production had dropped back. It was clear that higher, more efficient and targeted investments in quality education and training would be crucial for finding innovative ways back to growth, sustainable development and for safeguarding equitable and inclusive societies.

Educational cooperation in the Danube Region has been a central element within international affairs of the Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Research since the 1990s. When the ministry took up its coordinating role of the Priority Area 9 (PA9) "People and Skills" in 2011, it did so based on a long-standing tradition and many success stories of educational cooperation with countries in Central Europe, the Western Balkans and South-Eastern Europe.

In line with the overall objectives of the Strategy, the coordination role was started with the ambition to create opportunities for exchange and cooperation as well as to enable and promote empowerment of people and institutions on all levels. For this purpose, PA9 focussed on setting up processes in which people, communities, associations and organizations could actively shape their common living space and learn to deal creatively with existing challenges and needs.

Within this setting, the EU also provided funding for a Danube Region pilot project entitled "Empowering Young People – Connecting Europe" as part of the Ministry's coordinating task.

This highly successful project brought together 16 general and vocational schools from eleven Danube Region countries to develop and implement innovative and cross-border actions on promoting dialogue between cultures, active citizenship and commitment to sustainable development.

On the level of Priority Area Coordination, a functioning cooperation and communication structure was set up involving all 14 Danube Region countries, the European Commission and the European Training Foundation, as well as already existing cooperation platforms and networks (in particular the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe – ERI SEE). The Priority Area Coordinators (PACs) jointly established a network of national representatives of the 14 Danube Region countries, consisting mainly of officials from labour and/or education ministries, but also representatives from NGOs and VET agencies. They together form the Steering Group of PA9, which as of November 2021 has already convened 21 times.

Beyond this, it became obvious that the Strategy needs broad participation of all relevant public and private stakeholders in order to succeed. A key measure to support networking is the annual stakeholder conference of Priority Area 9 that has been held by the PACs since 2012. These events have an impact both on a conceptual level by influencing the overall development of the Priority Area, and on a practical level by contributing to its implementation through new initiatives and projects.

Cross-border and regional projects play a central role in the implementation of the Strategy and there is substantial inspiration from successful projects to build upon and to develop ideas for the future. On top of that, the EUSDR also strengthens existing initiatives (e.g. the “Central European Cooperation in Education and Training” between Austria, Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia) and provides a common reference point and umbrella for many organizations, projects and networks. So far, more than 170 projects/measures have been labelled within PA9.

However, the Strategy is about much more than facilitating and implementing projects. PA9, in particular, places high importance on providing support to policy cooperation and has set up a constant exchange process among all of the Danube Region

countries regarding national developments in the fields of education and the labour market. As part of this, the first “Danube Region Monitor – People and Skills” report was published in 2019 to demonstrate developments in the region with respect to labour markets and education. The report includes detailed information and statistics on recent developments, which can be used by the authorities in all of the Danube Region countries as a basis for further policy work. The second report of the Danube Region Monitor is currently under preparation.

Overall, it is safe to say that since 2011, the Strategy and its Priority Area “People and Skills” have delivered on various levels: The Priority Area has substantially contributed to exchange and to concrete regional action within the field of education and training with an innovative combination of both bottom-up and top-down processes. It has provided relevant support to both policy development and to cooperation within projects. By bringing together EU Member States, (potential) candidate countries and neighbouring countries on equal footing, the Priority Area also has an important integrative and cohesive function.

The year 2021 marked the 10-year anniversary of implementing the EUSDR and the countries and the people in the region currently face again the challenge of fighting and recovering from yet another global crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on education systems worldwide, in Europe and the Danube Region and brought fundamental implications for learners, teachers, families and societies as a whole. Particularly young people have been heavily affected, with the risk of rising levels of early school leaving and increased educational inequalities as a result of ‘home schooling’ during lockdowns.

In this context, the Council of the European Union on 16 June 2020 highlighted that high-quality education and training have an important role to play in the recovery and that it is important to focus investment priorities also on education and training.

PA 9 reacted to these developments and, in 2020, started to facilitate an exchange of experiences, best practices and ideas on how to contribute to a more resilient Danube Region through digitalization, inclusion and education, focussing on questions, such as: What impact does the crisis have in the field of digital

education? How to mitigate learning losses and effects on disadvantaged learners? How to improve the quality of education and training in the context of the green transition? And there is the question of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on transnational and macro-regional cooperation in education.

The following four actions of the new Action Plan of the EUSDR, published in April 2020, will provide the strategic framework for cooperation in education and training in the period ahead:

**ACTION 5** aims at improving the quality and efficiency of education and training systems. It addresses issues related to enhancing the anticipation of skills needs, the modernisation of education systems and the provision of vocational education and training. In the COVID-19 context, there is a potential focus on digitalization in the field of teacher education and development to make teachers fit for the digital age.

**ACTION 6** focusses on providing relevant skills and competences. As repeatedly highlighted by Commission reports and assessments of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), too many pupils in Danube Region countries acquire only a low level of relevant competences. Furthermore, within this action, the development of digital competences at all levels of learning can be addressed.

Important topics for cooperation under **ACTION 7** on Lifelong Learning and Learning Mobility are the improvement of transitions both within education and training and from education to work. To promote school cooperation and learning mobility (also through electronic means) through joint school projects across the Danube Region, PA9 initiated annual seminars organized by OeAD in its role as the Austrian Agency for Erasmus+ and Austrian eTwinning National Support Organisation.

**ACTION 8** on Inclusive Education, Equity, Common Values and Sustainable Development deals with key issues to make education and training more inclusive, reduce the number of early school leavers and enhance equal access to education. Already back in 2014, Priority Area 9 established a Youth Platform to connect schools and teachers with youth centres, civil society organizations and youth workers. Another key aspect concerns civic and social competences to participate fully in diverse and

democratic societies as well as to take action towards promoting sustainable development and the green transition in the Danube Region.

Within the overall framework of the EUSDR Action Plan, the participating countries have jointly defined the promotion of digital skills and competences, ensuring equal opportunities and inclusion, and enhancing VET in the context of the green transition as strategic cooperation priorities for post-COVID-19 recovery and beyond. The launch of the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence in cooperation with the European Training Foundation in November 2021 is a current initiative that addresses several of these cooperation priorities. It aims at promoting VET excellence in the areas of going green and inclusion through policy exchange and by facilitating cooperation between Danube Region Centres of Vocational Excellence.

We look forward to continuing working together within the framework of Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” and thank all partners involved for the great cooperation over the past ten years. ●

**DARIA BOVKUN**

Priority Area Coordinator, Ministry of Education and Science, Ukraine  
(until January 2022)

Ukraine's participation in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region is an extremely important instrument for the ongoing process of Ukrainian cooperation with the EU. The EUSDR has provided our country with an unprecedented opportunity to develop common policy in the Danube Region in cooperation with EU Member States. Such cooperation has a positive impact on both national and regional stakeholders in Ukraine and accelerates the alleviation of political and social barriers between Ukraine and our partner countries within the Danube Region.

In 2020, Ukraine joined Austria and the Republic of Moldova in the coordination of Priority Area 9 "People and Skills". The education component of such cooperation implies strengthening cooperation in VET, in particular by further development of an effective system of vocational education and training that would respond to the needs of the labour market. It also presumes development of digital skills in the region and digitalization of VET.

To support the implementation of PA9 in Ukraine we have created an informal PA9 Support Team in Ukraine that includes central executive bodies and representatives of civil society, which continuously provides expertise and assistance on various topics in the field of education, social policy and the labour market. This initiative enhanced the communication between the ministries, state agencies and civil society, which is also unique, and, as it turned out to be, an effective communication instrument.

In 2021, Ukrainian regions joined the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence. What we have observed is that such an experience prompts other Ukrainian regions to take part in transnational and cross-border projects.

Our colleagues from Austria and Republic of Moldova kindly entrusted us with the preparation of the 20th Steering Group Meeting and 9th PA9 Stakeholder Conference in 2021. It was a great experience and responsibility to carry out events, in partnership with the PAC9 Team, for 14 member states of EUSDR, taking into consideration the most relevant topics to be covered. In particular, one of the key aims of the Stakeholder Conference was to discuss current opportunities for non-EU countries to take part in projects and initiatives under PA9 for better integration into the Danube Region.

In November 2021, Ukraine took over the Presidency in the EUSDR. One of the two thematic priorities of the Presidency is dedicated to the development of human capital and labour markets. The experience we gained coordinating PA9 became crucial while identifying thematic priorities of the Ukrainian Presidency. However, there is a lot of work ahead. ●



## Regional Cooperation in Education and Training – ERI SEE and the Learning from Within

Investing in  
People and Skills

**TINA ŠARIĆ**

Director, Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe/  
ERI SEE Secretariat

The Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE) is an initiative resulting from the joint efforts of 7 countries from the South Eastern European region: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and the Republic of Moldova (5 of them belonging to the Danube Region). It is oriented at supporting education and training developments in the region and their alignment with European trends and developments, while keeping the focus on regional and national specificities and needs.



Participants at the 9th Meeting of the South Eastern European Education and Training (SEE TET) Network (Budva, Montenegro – 14-15 October 2021)

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The important feature of this initiative is that it is fully regionally owned, main partners and governance being from the region, making strategic and thematic decisions. This regional inter-governmental initiative, implemented by its Secretariat (a legal body with the status of an international organization) is supported by the ministries of education from the region, which identified the importance of an agreed, structured, sustainable and visionary regional cooperation in the field of education and training for the prosperity of the region and its people. Cooperation in the region in the framework of ERI SEE relies on regional and international expertise, development of joint solutions, exchange of practices and ideas, and creates the added value of having a bigger picture of what is relevant and needed not only within one country, but within a region, and not only now, but with a medium-term perspective in sight. In this regard, taking into account the priorities of the European Union Strategy for Danube Region (EUSDR) – being the largest and most diverse macro-regional strategy – and particularly those of the Priority Area 9 “People and Skills”, is of particular relevance when deciding on future goals and steps.

ERI SEE, relying on its cooperation with the relevant ministries, national agencies and bodies, and international organizations, and drawing on research, studies and strategic national documents, has defined several main challenges the region is facing in the area of education and training with effects on the overall quality of life in the region. Some of these challenges include education and training systems not preparing students for the labour markets, as skills (both professional and “soft”) are not acquired to a satisfactory level during the formative years. Schools often offer factual knowledge, which, in the teaching and learning process, is not adequately processed and integrated by students for their use in everyday life. Teacher education and training programmes do not offer consistent and adequate trainings responding to the teachers’ real needs and developments in the world of work, and their needs are often not taken into account or are not properly identified. The publication “Education in the Western Balkans – Findings from PISA”<sup>6</sup> from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) shows that the quality of education in the Western Balkan region has improved over time, though there is still much room

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<sup>6</sup> [www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-in-the-western-balkans\\_764847ff-en](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-in-the-western-balkans_764847ff-en)

for improvement compared to countries in the European Union, which makes the students from the region less competitive in the rapidly changing labour market and economy. Qualifications across the region are in some cases not easily recognized, thus leaving graduates with no access to the labour market or further education levels; and quality assurance systems for higher education are in many aspects not meeting the European criteria we aim for.

To tackle these challenges, ERI SEE has put regional resources together (human and financial, significantly supported by Austrian contributions), and joined them with EU experts and international organizations to work on potential solutions. 4 main areas of interventions, in the focus of 4 expert groups, can be identified:

- 1** Modernization of VET, in the focus of the South Eastern European Vocational Education and Training Network – SEEVET Net
- 2** External evaluation of institutions, in the focus of the Regional group of experts on quality assurance in pre-tertiary education
- 3** Teacher education and training, in the focus of the South Eastern European Teacher Education and Training Network
- 4** Recognition of academic (higher education) qualifications in the focus of the Working group on recognition of academic qualifications

Modernization in VET in the context of the regional cooperation primarily focuses on joint work on occupational standards and qualification standards – together with business representatives from the whole region, chambers of commerce and with the main bodies in charge of VET policy and implementation. Another important aspect is supporting teachers in the implementation of work-based learning components of curricula.

The main ERI SEE partner in the implementation of these activities is the South Eastern European Vocational Education and Training Network (SEEVET Net), a strong advocate for modernization in the VET sector in the region for years. Composed of the most relevant representatives of VET (national agencies or centres for VET and ministries) with a strong vision

and determination, it works on connecting VET with businesses, creating work-based learning opportunities for students and defining new occupational standards for new or modernized occupations needed by employers. The work on the regional level is intensified with the project “Towards regionally-based occupational standards”, which is funded by the Austrian Development Agency. The project focuses on the development of regionally-based occupational and qualification standards, as an innovative practice and with coordinated actions taken in cooperation between the SEEVET Net and chambers of commerce representing the voice of the businesses. The benefits are multifold – the labour market needs of the whole region are recognized and defined for the purpose of their entry into the education system, first through occupational standards and then through qualification standards. In this way, future students from the region will be prepared for the labour market of not only their country, but for the region as a whole. Eventually, this may lead to the circulation of the labour market force in the region, and not to its drain and complete loss for the region.



Publication „A Methodology for the Development of Regionally-based Occupational Standards“

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The cooperation between the business and education sectors across the region is about to take the next step in the development of joint regionally-based qualification standards,

which is going to add to the comparability of qualifications in the region and their easier recognition among employers. This is going to happen in the scope of the new regional project “Enhancing Quality of Education and Training in SEE”, again funded by the Austrian Development Agency. Apart from regionally-based qualification standards and related national curricula, developing aspects of work-based learning and providing support to teachers and instructors through trainings and material is also envisaged. With these actions, the education and training systems in the region are getting closer together, as well as the labour markets. They join to define what is needed and what will be needed by economies, and provide solutions for that.

It is to be explored, in the framework of future actions, how business developments and needs can be more quickly addressed by the education sector, keeping the standards and at the same time increasing flexibility to needs. In these endeavours, the Western Balkan 6 Chambers Investment Forum is an important partner.

ERI SEE is also coordinating the work of a Network of regional experts in quality assurance in pre-tertiary education. External evaluation, as one of the pillars of the quality assurance systems, has been identified as a subject of particular relevance for regional cooperation, as it focuses on quality standards that affect teaching and learning happening in the whole region. Currently, some of the challenges include over-burdening of external evaluators as well as schools with complex administrative procedures and overlaps of various processes resulting in a number of development or recommendation plans that are hard to follow or implement. External evaluation is often seen as a process that must be gone through instead of a process that supports quality development at school level, which is in fact its goal. The building of a quality culture and trust is lost among the paper work.

Within the actions of this network, certain aspects of external evaluation will be looked into from a regional perspective: continuous improvement and professional development of external evaluators, their institutions, as well as the process itself; how to make the process more supportive to schools in these challenging times, and more focused on the partnership approach and quality culture building. Processes of external evaluation will be analysed from a regional perspective, missing elements will

be added, and elements needing modernization will be revised. This will create a wonderful opportunity for exchanging practices and experiences both among the region as well as with EU experts, also including elements of gender equality, inclusion and social sustainability as a way of building more equitable school systems in the region. These activities will take place within the already mentioned project “Enhancing Quality of Education and Training Systems in SEE” and are based on the “Study on the Aspects of External Evaluation in General Education: Focus on external evaluators’ initial and continuous trainings and monitoring in South Eastern Europe”<sup>7</sup>.

In addition, another aspect of quality is the quality of teachers, and their education and training opportunities. To support our work, an analysis of the current practices existing in the region has been made and published: “Study on Teacher Education and Training Needs Analysis Systems in SEE”<sup>8</sup>. Through connecting teacher education and training experts in South Eastern Europe in the SEE Teacher Education and Training Network, and offering them opportunities to exchange ideas, views and practices, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, ERI SEE is trying to support policy makers and practitioners on what teachers need and how they can improve their practices in these dynamic times. Focus is placed on digital practices, online and digital teaching and learning, as well as needs teachers may have in this respect that are not being provided for by the training programmes. What is of particular interest is how to build on the benefits that the pandemic has brought in terms of digitalization of schools, teaching and learning practices. Relevant papers have been published to support this, such as “Whole School Approach to Online and Blended Teaching and Learning - Recommendations for ERI SEE members”<sup>9</sup>. Strong support in these efforts has been provided by the European Training Foundation (ETF) and OeAD – Austria’s Agency for Education and Internationalisation.

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<sup>7</sup> [www.erisee.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/SEE-Study-external-evaluation-FINAL.pdf](http://www.erisee.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/SEE-Study-external-evaluation-FINAL.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [www.erisee.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/STUDY\\_ON\\_TEACHER\\_EDUCATION\\_AND\\_TRAINING\\_NEEDS.pdf](http://www.erisee.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/STUDY_ON_TEACHER_EDUCATION_AND_TRAINING_NEEDS.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> [www.erisee.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Whole-school-approach-to-Online-and-Blended-Teaching-and-Learning.pdf](http://www.erisee.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Whole-school-approach-to-Online-and-Blended-Teaching-and-Learning.pdf)



Participants at the 9th Meeting of the SEE TET Network (Budva, Montenegro – 14-15 October 2021)

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Recognition of higher education (academic) qualifications in the region has been strongly supported by the Regional Cooperation Council and ERI SEE through coordination of the Working group of experts. It focuses on preparing multilateral agreements on recognition, supporting easier, faster and fairer recognition of qualifications acquired in the region and following trends of automatic recognition. As an important aspect contributing to the social capital of the region, quality assurance standards in higher education have been approached by external experts who have analysed the current situation in the region in terms of reaching the European standards (as defined in the “Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area”<sup>10</sup>), identifying benefits and challenges and measures to tackle them.

All these joint efforts and activities have led to a greater understanding of the relevance of regional cooperation, and its visibility. There is now a clear understanding that the region with its common challenges and circumstances can only profit by tackling them together. It has become increasingly evident that

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<sup>10</sup> [www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG\\_2015.pdf](http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf)



regional solutions are more relevant, of more quality, more comprehensive and satisfying the needs of a greater number of people, than just those focusing on national developments. Through cooperation within – cooperation with the representatives from the region – learning and development within happens, which is here to stay. In this regard, ERI SEE has a coordinative and facilitative role, creating space for exchanges of ideas and practices, identifying current and future challenges, and planning adequate responses for the region. We recognize the resources existing in the region, put them together and build on the common grounds, with the support of external assistance.

The work is continuing as even more strategic planning, thinking and working lies ahead. Coordinated approaches from all segments of society, education and training included, from all economies in the region, and with all relevant actors, as well as political support and investments, are needed in order to increase the quality of education and training and improve the economic and social conditions. We keep the vision of a productive and affluent, solid and stable region, full of opportunities in all areas and all ages of one's life, where no one is left behind. And we are committed to contributing to it, within our mandate, through focusing on the quality of education and training. ●



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## Introduction

Since 2011 and the start of the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, the European Training Foundation (ETF) has been involved actively in the unfolding of different actions under the Strategy's Priority Area 9 "People and Skills". Our involvement in Priority Area 9 has gathered under a natural regional "roof" the significant work we do in countries in the EU neighbourhood.

Many things have happened in the last ten years in the domain of education, training and skills development systems. At European level, triggered by the economic crisis, the global sustainable agenda and even the Covid-19 pandemic, the perspective of education and training systems has changed. Never before was the impact of global challenges on the shaping of EU policies in education and training so clear.

Evidence of this shift are key EU documents like the Rethinking of education, the European Skills Agenda (2016) and the European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness, and resilience (2020). On the latter, the strong emphasis on Vocational Education and Training (VET) has delivered a Proposal for a Council Recommendation on VET.

During the last decades, many European countries have placed the reform of VET systems at the forefront of their policy making strategies. The Copenhagen process launched in 2002 (Osnabrück has been the latest stop of this process in 2020) has inspired a number of changes that helped VET systems grow and respond better to matching the provision of skills and learning with workplace needs.

In this context of continuous change in VET systems, two themes have attracted a lot of attention among policy makers. Internationalisation of VET, as a two-sided approach in learning and exchange between countries at a global level, is one of them. Undoubtedly, the international dimension is among the foundational principles of the EU Danube Region Strategy, where 5 EU neighbouring countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia and Ukraine) are equal partners with EU Danube countries and regions.

The rise of centres of vocational excellence is the second theme that attracted a lot of attention and came out from the policy debates of the last years. Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) were an underlying “dormant” element in many policy documents before. Though, as a concept, vocational excellence is not a new one, the way this has become an integral part of the effort to improve quality in VET has made it a very popular policy domain all around the world.

The CoVEs approach is an alternative to [traditional vocational education](#), training and employment policies and is driven by leading ministries (at central level) involving regional/local business (social partners, employers, individual companies) and research/innovation actors (e.g., universities, private innovators/incubators, etc.). In ETF, we acknowledge the underlying tension in vocational excellence regarding its inclusiveness. It is however our belief that vocational excellence can exist beyond the individual centres of excellence. Thus, centres of excellence can support others to improve and be a driver of change for the whole VET system. What we described in our publication [CoVEs – engines of vocational excellence as transmission of excellence](#) has attracted a lot of interest and created opportunities for partnerships at national, regional or global level<sup>11</sup>.

The ETF’s Network for Excellence (ENE) is inspired by a Commission-led initiative in the EU countries, which establishes Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) partnerships. At the same time, the policy developments in partner countries also informed ETF on launching a network of excellence in the EU neighbourhood.

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<sup>11</sup> [www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/centres-vocational-excellence-engine-vocational-education](http://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/centres-vocational-excellence-engine-vocational-education)

Through ENE, the ETF aims to apply an approach based on excellence, on co-creating knowledge and methodological tools, on forging partnerships and on providing peer learning opportunities to countries outside the EU. This is done through focussing on relevant selected themes to offer more opportunities for national, transnational, and international partnerships and platforms, which can then support the transmission of excellence across national systems<sup>12</sup>. The ENE nature indeed relies on consolidating an international platform<sup>13</sup>.

In this regard, this paper aims to describe the functionality of centres of vocational excellence as beacons of change and as engines of VET development. As such, the ETF is cooperating with Priority Area 9 to shape a proposal for the development of a network of centres of vocational excellence at the level of the Danube Region.

### **Accumulating knowledge on Centres of Vocational Excellence**

In 2020, the ETF developed the ENE Self-Assessment tool (ENESAT) and launched a survey among the ENE CoVEs asking them to self-assess their own performance on 7 dimensions of excellence<sup>14</sup> (the survey was sent to 82 CoVEs from 12 ETF partner countries).

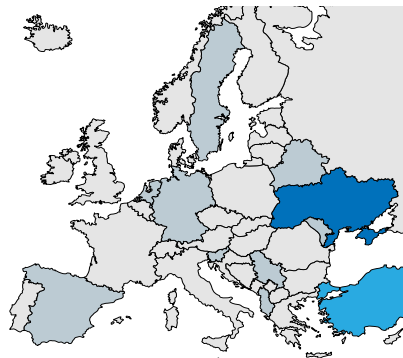
The survey helped to shed light on a range of functions and services that a CoVE performs, providing an evidence-based understanding of their achievement in the considered excellence dimensions, their planned development priorities, and the extent to which they provide leadership and coordination to other centres and partners.

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<sup>12</sup> ENE thematic approaches - shaping main areas of excellence - are: Lifelong Learning (including Entrepreneurial CoVEs role), Education and business cooperation/collaboration (focusing on Work-based Learning); Pedagogy and Professional development; Autonomy and institutional development (governance, financing); Skills for Smart Specialization; Industry 4.0 & Digitalization; Going Green and sustainable Development; Social Inclusion and Equity.

<sup>13</sup> ENE is composed by more than 200 CoVEs (134 CoVEs from 16 ETF Partner Countries; 75 from EU Member States and 7 CoVEs from 7 African countries). From the Danube Region, ENE has (2) CoVEs from Slovenia; (4) from Moldova; (6) from Serbia; and (25) from Ukraine. (Data June 2021)

<sup>14</sup> For further details: "EXPLORING VOCATIONAL EXCELLENCE: A Working Paper on the Self-Assessment carried out by members of the ETF Network for Excellence (ENE)", ETF, 2021. [www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-07/ene\\_working\\_paper\\_exploring\\_vocational\\_excellence.pdf](http://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-07/ene_working_paper_exploring_vocational_excellence.pdf)



Map of Europe showing the countries from which CoVEs participated in the ENE self-assessment survey<sup>15</sup>

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In 2020, 72 CoVEs<sup>16</sup> completed the questionnaire, half of them from 3 Danube Region countries (Republic of Moldova, Serbia and Ukraine). The countries from which CoVEs took part are shown in the map. Most of the participating CoVEs considered relevant all the proposed dimensions of excellence (more than 80% of them decided to answer to all the dimensions, with dimension A “Education-business collaboration” being the one self-assessed by almost all CoVEs).

More than two thirds of participating CoVEs self-assessed as “Mature<sup>17</sup>” in dimension B “Pedagogy and professional development”, dimension C “Autonomy, institutional improvement, and resources” and dimension A “Education-business collaboration”, with a relevant degree of consistency among these three dimensions: “mature” CoVEs in one dimension are usually “mature” also in the other.

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<sup>15</sup> The designations employed and the presentation of material on the map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the European Training Foundation concerning the legal status of any country, territory or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

<sup>16</sup> Ukraine (27), Turkey (12), Serbia (6), Kazakhstan (5), Georgia (4), Belarus (3), Republic of Moldova (3), Armenia (2), Israel (2), Spain (2), Albania (1), Azerbaijan (1), Germany (1), Netherlands (1), Slovenia (1).

<sup>17</sup> The ‘level of development’ score generated by the online tool is ranked into three levels of development: ‘Foundational’, ‘Developing’ and ‘Mature’.

FIGURE 1

Overall level of development by dimension – Share of “Mature” CoVEs



ENE 2020  
Danube Countries

The survey suggests that the high performance in the above-mentioned dimensions is driven by the implementation of mentoring schemes for newly qualified teachers and assessment of learners needs for dimension B “Pedagogy and professional development”, the authority to make external contracts and to appoint staff for dimension C “Autonomy”, and coordination with industry and level of learners’ placement for dimension A “Education-business cooperation”<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> The mentioned indicators obtained the highest scores.

The participating Danube Region countries attest their strength in the same dimensions, self-assessing better than the ENE 2020 average in dimension A and dimension B. For more than 90% of CoVEs from the Danube Region enterprises help to assess learners and at least 30% of graduates enter employment or further study (dimension A) and there is a [systemic use of assessment data to improve performance](#) and [teachers receive feedback on their teaching modalities](#) (dimension B).

The box below shows examples of good practices from participating Danube Region CoVEs for dimensions A and B:

<b>Dimension A</b> <b>Education-Business Collaboration and Cooperation</b>	<b>Dimension B</b> <b>Pedagogy and Professional Development</b>
<p>In cooperation with a local enterprise, we have developed a new profile in Serbia based on the needs of this enterprise. Our students were employed by this enterprise immediately after obtaining a degree. (Vazduhoplovna akademija, Aviation Academy, Serbia)</p>	<p>From September 2015, teachers have been implementing new approaches to the personal development of students and the development of students' life skills. Together, they have created a database of methods for life skills in an information society and improved the professional skills of teachers in the use of active methods of teaching. (Chortkiv Higher Vocational School, Ukraine)</p>
<p>The company 'Kryukov Carriage Works' carries out formal assessment of the students of the school for profile 7219 'Welder'. (Higher Vocational School №7 Kremenchuk Poltava region, Ukraine)</p>	<p>We actively participate in academic mobility activities with educational institutions throughout the country and promote the exchange of best practices between colleagues through the regular organization of seminars, trainings, etc. (PI Centre of Excellence in Economy and Finance, Republic of Moldova)</p>

Most ENE members are currently at “developing” level in dimensions G “Going green” and F “Industry 4.0 and digitalisation” (47% and 42% respectively), suggesting that these areas are the less developed dimensions of excellence.

According to responding CoVEs, development priorities in these domains refer to the reduction of carbon footprint, with 72% of CoVEs currently working or intending to work on this issue in the coming years, the development of new programmes for green occupations (67%), benchmarking of digital competence (67%), and development of a digital strategy (60%).

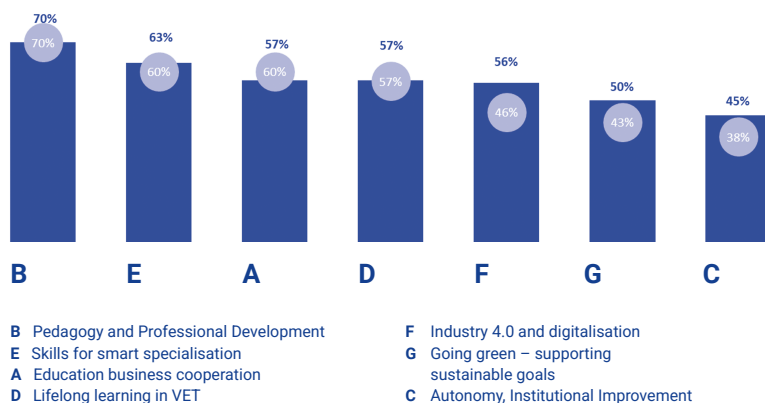
The same priorities are shared by the participating Danube Region countries, which emphasise the importance of training on and use of latest green and digital technologies.

The ENE Self-assessment Framework includes a section within each dimension about CoVEs' Leadership and Coordination roles: a group of indicators addressing the way in which the CoVE works with other institutions in transmitting and sharing excellence.

According to the 2020 survey results, there is not a significant correlation between development scores and leadership scores: not only advanced CoVEs can act as leaders or coordinators. CoVEs are most likely to assume a leadership/coordination role in dimension B "Pedagogy and professional development", where about 88% of the network share practice or research with other centres and work with schools and industry to design continuing professional development (or partially do it).

FIGURE 2

### Leadership scores by dimension – Share of max score



The Danube Region countries reflect the same tendency across dimensions, being more inclined to leadership in dimension B, where 94% of CoVEs affirm to support development of pedagogy across other schools (or are in the process of doing it).

### **Building networks – Why working at regional level can help**

Setting up in ENE a transnational platform of Danube Region members might bring tremendous added value. The Danube Region countries can have their regional policy agenda whilst at the same time having the opportunity to build cooperation through ENE with CoVEs from other regions. This could be useful for having a more relevant presence for better informing regional policy dialogue on excellence, tailoring policy approaches and mutual learning (based on EU, ETF Partner Countries and other international countries) and for supporting common developments and tackling the most burning policy gaps in the region.

For example, common policy priorities shaping excellence for Danube Region countries are: strengthening quality provision – and optimisation of providers –, changing the role of teachers and trainers, increasing the stake of the private sector in lifelong learning, and improving the quality and relevance of VET outcomes for inclusive and innovative economies<sup>19</sup>. These policy issues are key ones for the years to come and could be a good starting point for positioning a shared policy dialogue basis among participating countries.

### **Emerging areas of excellence:**

#### **Green dimension and Social inclusion**

The European Green Deal underlines the importance of investing in upskilling and reskilling for a smooth transition to a green economy; at the same time, the Sustainable Development Goal 4 calls for a renovated effort to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. CoVEs play a crucial role in identifying the excellence dimension of these emerging areas, facilitating practice-based knowledge exchange.

The green dimension has already been considered in the ENE self-assessment tool (ENESAT), whose results show its lowest achievement in comparison to other dimensions of excellence.

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<sup>19</sup> ETF Torino process assessment reports on South Eastern Europe and Turkey and the Eastern Partnership region



Only two indicators have been fully implemented by more than 50% of CoVEs: raising awareness with respect to green issues and inclusion of green skills in relevant programmes (both foundational), while lacking behind with regard to other relevant drivers for an effective green transition. The ENESAT results identify important areas of improvement that could be addressed with specific supporting activities. The ETF is currently piloting an additional module on Social Inclusion and Equity to be added to ENESAT, and two initiatives are ongoing to set up peer-learning partnerships within the ENE network addressing green transition (“GRETA: Greening Responses to Excellence through Thematic Actions”) and inclusion (“Skills for Inclusion -the role of ETF Network for Excellence (ENE)”).

## Conclusions

- Excellence strongly builds on internationalization as a key operational concept for systemic change. The ENE is an international network for practitioners to exchange learning and good practices that help addressing continuous improvement and transmitting excellence without borders.
- Setting up together with Priority Area 9 of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region and in tandem with ENE a transnational Danube Region platform could offer significant added value for policy exchange and mutual learning experiences to address common regional developments and tackle gaps based on international evidence.
- Further, identifying common policy issues for the region whilst working on acknowledged thematic fields of excellence (e.g., social inclusion and equity, excellence in going green, plus ENESAT trends) could be an accurate starting point for Danube Region countries in order to work effectively as transnational partners within international ENE arrangements. ●

## Steps to a job through “Learning by Doing”

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Implemented between January 2017 and June 2019, for 30 months, “Learning by Doing”<sup>20</sup> was one of the projects that brought together the countries bordering the Danube river. The scheme was funded by the European Union through the Danube Transnational Programme. It offered an opportunity for 24 organizations and institutions from Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, the Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia to develop joint activities and to establish a framework for joint capacity building for relevant vocational education and training actors.



“Learning by Doing” project information materials

© NCTVETD

<sup>20</sup> [www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/learning-by-doing](http://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/learning-by-doing),  
[www.facebook.com/LearningbyDoingProject](https://www.facebook.com/LearningbyDoingProject)

The partnership leader, having a complex role in managing the project activities, was the Budapest Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Romania was represented by the National Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training Development (NCTVETD) and the Hunedoara Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The project idea started from the fact that vocational education and training (VET) at all levels is at the core of European responses to labor market needs. Accordingly, strengthening work-based learning (WBL) in VET has become a central point in European policies.

The project is in line with the fourth thematic Priority Axis of the Danube Transnational Programme, which finances transnational cooperation projects in accordance with the priorities of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR): The project contributes to a well-governed Danube region by providing support for the implementation of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region and improving legal and policy frameworks to address societal challenges such as labour market measures, education systems, demographic change, etc.

The main objective of the project was to improve the capacity of relevant actors in vocational education and training by reinforcing partnerships at a regional, national and transnational level to facilitate the development of and strengthen existing vocational education and training systems in the Danube Region countries.

To reach this goal, three main directions were developed during the 30 months of the project:

- Tackling the challenges and common needs of VET systems;
- Identifying, analyzing and cataloging existing and insufficient capacities;
- Developing national visions of VET systems based on worked-based learning (WBL)

In Romania, the activities were logically linked, starting from the local needs, which were translated into recommendations for initial vocational education and training and harmonized in the transitional framework specific to the project.

The actions carried out during the implementation period with the group of local actors of the VET system (stakeholders group) in Romania contributed to the consolidation of partnerships at a regional and local level.

Specifically, through the action plan implemented, the aim was to engage schools and their partners, teachers and parents in actions to contribute, at the level of society as a whole, to a change of perspectives on initial vocational training in direct relation to the labor market, but at the same time in line with the aspirations of future graduates.

The interventions proposed by the group of local actors had, as a starting point, practical actions at a local or county level, with measurable results and a high impact at the level of students, companies, the VET system and the community.

As a result, case studies were presented to other regions in Romania in the context of sensitization campaigns. These meetings highlighted the mutually advantageous partnerships between economic operators, staff from schools with specific responsibilities in WBL, principals of VET units, school inspectors and other relevant actors.

During these meetings, the experience of each region in terms of good practices implemented locally in the field of VET was also highlighted.

The final results of the project, at a local, regional and national level, were translated into a series of policy recommendations for the VET sector, which were presented in a High-Level Round Table. They aim to:

- 1 ensure access to VET, real-time identification of the need for skills and qualifications taking into consideration the rapid and continuous changes in the labor market and last but not least the creation of a counseling model<sup>21</sup>.
- 2 ensure quality in VET, in order to increase the attractiveness of vocational education and training and focus on the skills and competencies needs of potential employers.

An innovative element of the project was the external monitoring of VET schools (with the support of actors relevant to VET, but

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<sup>21</sup> The stakeholders group considered that there is a need for an innovative approach to counseling, by providing this service to students, together with their parents.

external to the education system), from the point of view of adapting the educational offer to the requirements of the labor market. Thus, a “Title of Excellence” scheme was implemented, granting a distinction to VET schools as a validation of good practices in the development and promotion of initial education corresponding to employers' needs. The criteria for excellence – attractiveness, flexibility, relevance of the offer and innovation of learning and business processes, respectively – were monitored in the schools that voluntarily enrolled in this campaign, in two editions, held in 2018 and 2019.

The project created a training model for VET teachers through internships<sup>22</sup> within the partner companies of the VET system, in order to change the teaching approach in the classroom, the context in which teachers work and the implementation of new technologies.

### 3 approach work-based learning in VET at a local level "from dual to trial".

The experience of the last years shows the benefits of a model of a tripartite partnership in VET: in addition to the classic partnership between a school and an economic operator, there is a third entity – the local authority, which motivates economic operators to get involved and contribute to the quality of education and training. So, our stakeholders group proposed a specific model in VET, called “trial” in Romanian.

The transnational dimension of the project was achieved through formal meetings of the management team and, especially, through study visits and staff exchanges.

Thus, each organization or institution fulfilled in turn the role of the host for the other partners and the countries were divided into categories of experience in dual education / workplace learning: countries with rich experience, countries in transition to workplace learning/dual education and countries, in which the implementation of dual education is at the beginning (good practice countries, systems in transition, early stage of transition).

These multilateral meetings were certainly the focal point of the project. They allowed each host partner in the project to highlight

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<sup>22</sup> These skills development internships for VET teachers took place directly at the partner companies, in order to be able to keep pace with the very dynamic technological development, and to be able to adapt the curricula and the teaching methods.

its own experience in learning at work and to inspire guests with ideas for future actions and measures to apply when they returned home. Staff exchanges took place in Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

Thus, the functioning of the social partnership in vocational training, the improvement of learning outcomes, the curriculum, the identification of common points and those that differentiate each partner from other, were some of the objectives of the study visits that led to debates, analyses and exchange of views between participants. At the same time, the particularities of each vocational training system were better understood. And, most importantly, friendships have been made between people with the same concerns and who want to do more so that generations of young people can more easily follow a career path.

All these activities, at a local, national and transnational level, have been translated, from a technical point of view, into a common, transnational guide to enhance the efficiency of work-based learning. The »Guidebook for More Efficient Work-Based Learning in the Danube Region«<sup>23</sup> was written on the basis of case studies carried out at the level of each partner country, as well as scenarios to modernize national VET systems in the Danube Region.



Project result: Stakeholder agreement for VET development

© NCTVETD

<sup>23</sup> [www.interreg-danube.eu/uploads/media/approved\\_project\\_output/0001/34/6f11f83c85ca299e9d9da6fd69c7638e592925bc.pdf](http://www.interreg-danube.eu/uploads/media/approved_project_output/0001/34/6f11f83c85ca299e9d9da6fd69c7638e592925bc.pdf)

## **What did we learn in the framework of the »Learning by doing« project?**

We found, in every country, examples of good practices transferable or adaptable to our education system.

We met people contributing to the development of a quality VET in their areas of work. In fact, all local actors involved in the project reached an excellent level of cooperation.

We learned that excellence in VET means a sustained effort on the part of schools and its staff to provide attractive qualifications, as well as an openness of educational institutions to innovation and adaptation to the local needs of the labor market.

And, importantly, we have laid the foundations for future collaborations between the countries of the Danube Region. ●

## Digital Education in the Republic of Serbia – Evolving Policy, Regional Cooperation and Looking Ahead for Better Educational Outcomes

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Digital Education Policy in the Republic of Serbia has started to evolve at the beginning of 2013 although as a marginalized topic and often not recognized as a priority by decision makers. Due to the insufficient coverage of the topic in the [Education Development Strategy for Serbia until 2020<sup>24</sup>](#), which was prepared by the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development and published in 2012, the National Education Council of the Republic of Serbia decided to initiate the preparation of the [Guidelines for Advancing the Integration of Information-Communication Technologies in Education<sup>25</sup>](#) that were published in 2013. The guidelines were meant to complement the strategy and, by using a soft policy approach, to contribute to the development of digital education.

The guidelines presented an abundance of quantitative and qualitative data that reflected the given level of development and the application of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) within the system of elementary and secondary education in Serbia at the time. The main text of the document is divided in five connected units that encompass the following:

- Basic notions and principles of the successful integration of ICT in education,
- Wider education policy interventions that influence the successful ICT integration,
- The role of ICT in the aims and outcomes of education,
- ICT in instruction, and
- ICT in specific areas of educational policy.

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<sup>24</sup> [www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/STRATEGIJA-OBRAZOVANJA.pdf](http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/STRATEGIJA-OBRAZOVANJA.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> [www.nps.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/SMERNICE\\_final.pdf](http://www.nps.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/SMERNICE_final.pdf)



Based on a comprehensive discussion within each of the five sections, 71 recommendations have been proposed in total. The given recommendations contributed to steering and harmonizing future activities to achieve efficient integration of ICT in the education system, overall and in particular as related to the teaching practice.

Since 2017, digitalization in education was one of the strategic goals of the Republic of Serbia. It is implemented through three basic activities:

- Human capacity development
- Development of ICT infrastructure
- Design and establishing of electronic services (Unified Education Information System, electronic gradebooks, digital textbooks, ...)

Already since 2017, there have been many government initiatives in this area with the aim of creating better conditions, which will enable students to develop key competences for lifelong learning, and cross-curricular competences as defined by the law. Also, the curriculum in pre-university education has been innovated and is based on learning outcomes. The emphasis is on obtaining generic and transversal knowledge and skills, with more opportunities for cross-curricular learning and the development of 21st-century skills (such as creativity, critical thinking, teamwork, problem solving).

There are promising policy developments elaborated in [The Education Development Strategy in the Republic of Serbia until 2030](#)<sup>26</sup> that has one segment dedicated to the development of digital education, which was followed by an Action Plan and dedicated budget.

Although much effort is invested and training opportunities are created, considering the average age of employees in education and the fast pace of technological developments, continuous support to teachers in the modern pedagogical use of technology is still needed. There is a lack of effective use of ICTs and particularly the use of Learning Management Systems in education and there are large numbers of untrained or tech-shy teachers. In order to support the process of improving digital

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<sup>26</sup> [www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/1-SROVRS-2030\\_MASTER\\_0402\\_V1.pdf](http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/1-SROVRS-2030_MASTER_0402_V1.pdf)

competences of teachers, the Republic of Serbia published its first **Digital Competence Framework of Teachers – Digital Age Teacher**<sup>27</sup> in 2017 and a revised version in 2019. An updated version is expected for 2022.



Publication “Digital Competence Framework of Teachers – Digital Age Teacher”

© Adobe Stock@Maksym Yemelyanov (cover)

Graphic design: Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation of Serbia

The formal expectations for students regarding the development of digital literacy are formulated in the Law on Foundations of the Education System<sup>28</sup>. The law intends to ensure a comprehensive approach to the development of complex and multi-layered concepts such as media, information and digital competences. It presents the regulatory framework aiming at continuous development of key or transversal and general cross-curricular competences within the Serbian pre-university education system. Digital literacy and digital competency are listed among the key and general interdisciplinary competences. The focus seems to involve an inevitable reduction in declarative knowledge and the need to develop new knowledge, practical skills and attitudes. The law highlights the need to assure higher transferability of knowledge in different fields, including better conversion of acquired competences into capacities for action, personal achievements, and lifelong learning.

<sup>27</sup> [https://zuov.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/2019\\_ODK\\_Nastavnik-za-digitalno-doba.pdf](https://zuov.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/2019_ODK_Nastavnik-za-digitalno-doba.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> Official Gazette, No. 88/2017, 27/2018 – other laws, 10/2019, 27/2018 – other laws and 6/2020

In a broader sense, the outcome of the learning process should be turned into practical skills and a new attitude, which allow students to act accordingly in complex social situations. (Basic) ICT skills, computational thinking and information literacy in pre-university education are developed through two school subjects: **Digital World and Computer Science**. Also, project-based learning involving (basic) ICT skills, computational thinking and information literacy is promoted through methodological instructions for teachers, which are an integral part of each school subject curriculum.

All pre-university schools have electronic gradebooks, and the majority of schools actively use them. Serbia was in 2019 and 2020 among the leading countries in Europe in the successful use of SELFIE<sup>29</sup> – an instrument for Self-reflection on Effective Learning by Fostering the use of Innovative Educational Technologies – but there are additional investments required in order to use the full potential of digital technologies for an improved quality of teaching and learning. In order to build an ecosystem around SELFIE, the Digital Schools Awards European pilot programme (A-SELFIE)<sup>30</sup> has been initiated in 2020. A-SELFIE is an initiative to promote and recognise the use of digital technology to deliver the best educational experience for pupils at secondary school level in Europe.



If we are to achieve better educational outcomes for our students, we should focus on the use of Learning Management Systems (e.g. Moodle<sup>31</sup>), which are managed at the school level, steered and supported at the national level and used by digitally competent teachers. We should also help the entire education community to gain a deeper understanding of characteristics of blended and online learning that represents an equally good and in certain circumstances (e.g. in response to the Covid-19 crisis) an even better educational environment for teaching and learning than school buildings.

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<sup>29</sup> <https://education.ec.europa.eu/selfie>

<sup>30</sup> <https://awards4selfie.eu/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://moodle.org/>

Regarding access to digital devices and the Internet, a survey in the Republic of Serbia from 2020 found that 74.3% of households have a computer, 94.1% have a mobile phone, and 81% have an Internet connection. Households without access to the Internet have stated, in the majority of cases, that they did not need it. So, the good news is that appropriate technology is already here or could be renewed quite quickly. Less encouraging is that school leaders, teachers and consequently students so far had very little, if any experience with quality online and blended learning. It is our obligation to further develop digital education and widely promote new organizational, technological and pedagogical approaches and opportunities to assure education recovery and its further development.

Digital technologies have a significant potential to contribute to the quality education of pupils and students, as well as adults involved in lifelong learning, during and after the Covid-19 crisis. Further discussions, exchange, cooperation and involvement of education actors are to be expected on how to improve the quality of online and blended learning in order to reach desired student learning outcomes.

Therefore, we should focus on and have more opportunities to discuss the meaning of digital evolution rather than discussing digital transformation. Our focus should be on how to strategically embed digital technologies into educational practices to assure evolutionary change that will over time assure good-quality blended and online education for all.

Some of the long-term approaches of the Republic of Serbia could be:

- Improving the strategic and regulatory framework for digital education development;
- Reforming teaching and learning curricula in the field of Digital Literacy and Computer Science (Digital World in the first cycle of primary education, students aged 7–10; Computer Science for the second cycle of primary education, students aged 11–14; Computer Science for secondary education, students aged 15–19);

- Providing instances of Moodle, free, open-source Learning Management Systems that enable teaching and learning based on contemporary and effective theories of learning (e.g. constructivism) for all primary and secondary schools;
- Empowering teachers to become confident and skilled in using digital technology to support learning in online environments through the provision of guidance, the Digital Competence Framework, the Instrument for Self-Reflection, in-service teacher training programs, and open educational resources;
- Supporting leadership and school development by encouraging self-reflection of schools in the area of their digital maturity;
- Fostering collaboration and sharing of good practices (e.g. Digital Education Conferences organized as a result of public/private partnerships);
- Improving connectivity and providing suitable models for the provision of digital equipment to learners and educators, including implementation of the Bridging Digital Divide program supporting learners at risk.

In the last ten years, the possibilities for cooperation in the area of digital education policy in the region were occasional and usually placed within other broader initiatives.

The main point for regular cooperation on digital education was assured within the Open Method of Coordination of the European Union with more than 30 meetings in Brussels and peer-learning activities in member countries. The Republic of Serbia has been invited to participate for the first time in 2014. The ET2020 Working Group on Digital Education: Learning, Teaching and Assessment concluded its activities in 2020. A new Working Group has recently been appointed with a mandate up to 2025.

It is worth to note that the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE)<sup>32</sup> has contributed in 2021 with the preparation of the document [Whole School Approach to Online and Blended Teaching and Learning - Recommendations for ERI SEE members](#)<sup>33</sup> that was also supported by the European Training Foundation (ETF) and the Austrian Agency for Education and

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<sup>32</sup> [www.erisee.org/](http://www.erisee.org/)

<sup>33</sup> [www.erisee.org/eri-see-publications/](http://www.erisee.org/eri-see-publications/)

Internationalisation (OeAD). ERI SEE is trying to guide policy makers and practitioners on what teachers need and how they can improve their practices in these dynamic times. Focus is placed on digital practices, online and digital teaching and learning and needs teachers may have in this respect that are not being provided for by training programmes. What is of particular interest is how to build on the benefits the pandemic has brought in terms of digitalization of schools and teaching and learning practices beyond the pandemic.

Regional cooperation, as it takes place in the framework of ERI SEE and also the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), is valuable to share experiences and best practices across borders. Meetings and conferences, that bring key actors together, such as Stakeholder Conferences of Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” of the EUSDR, provide important opportunities to learn from each other, which is essential to tackle the challenges that lie ahead of us and work together to develop high-quality digital education. ●

## eTwinning in the Danube Region – Facilitating Successful Cooperation of Schools and Teachers across Borders

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### eTwinning

is a community for schools in Europe. It offers a platform for staff (teachers, head teachers, librarians, etc.), working in a school in one of the 43 countries involved, to communicate, collaborate, develop projects, share and, in short, feel and be part of the most exciting learning community in Europe. eTwinning is co-funded by Erasmus+, the European programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport.<sup>34</sup>

eTwinning started its collaboration with Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) in 2012, using the combined networks to encourage and enable school cooperation in the involved countries. Since then, this cooperation has been one of the main priorities for OeAD, Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation, in its role as the Austrian eTwinning National Support Organisation.

Since 2013, OeAD organises **annual two-day eTwinning conferences for teachers of the Danube Region**, open to schools from the 13 countries that are part of both the EUSDR and eTwinning: Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, the Republic of Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine. The main aim of the conference is to initiate new eTwinning projects in the Danube Region among lower- and upper-secondary schools (i.e., with pupils between 10 and 19 years of age). In addition, information about the EUSDR and other cooperation frameworks in the region is presented, as well as training on how to use the eTwinning platform, and information on the possible combination of eTwinning with the other school actions in Erasmus+.

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<sup>34</sup> The central eTwinning platform can be found under [www.etwinning.net](http://www.etwinning.net).

The conference usually takes place in Austria, in close coordination with the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, which is one of the coordinators of Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” of the EUSDR.



Participants of the eTwinning Danube Region Conference (Vienna, Austria – 22-23 June 2017)

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Between 2013 and 2021, 419 teachers have, in total, taken part in eTwinning Danube Region conferences<sup>35</sup>. Keynote speakers have set the stage at these events by providing thematic inputs on various initiatives in the Danube Region. An update by Priority Area 9 on current topics and developments regarding educational cooperation within the EUSDR has become a fixed component of the conferences. Inputs have also been given by teachers who successfully started school cooperation projects during previous conferences and returned to share their experiences. The conference programme is always enriched by team-building and cultural activities, during which participants connect over shared culture and explore differences between their countries and education systems.

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<sup>35</sup> Participants per country 2013–2021 (total 419): Austria (92), Bosnia and Herzegovina (11), Bulgaria (28), Croatia (22), Czechia (37), Germany (40), Hungary (29), Republic of Moldova (37), Romania (27), Serbia (14), Slovakia (39), Slovenia (17), Ukraine (26)



As stated above, the main goal of the annual eTwinning Danube Region conference is to facilitate international school projects. In the period of 2013-2021, participants have developed a total of 103 project ideas. Each year, every participant is involved in at least one of these projects. The topics are wide-ranging and cover many aspects of the involved schools' curricula. Broadly speaking, about half of the projects focus on Arts & Culture in some way. Further popular themes are Environment & Sciences, Digitalisation, Sport & Health, and Languages<sup>36</sup>.



Participants of the eTwinning Danube Region Conference (Vienna, Austria – 13-14 June 2019)

© OeAD

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<sup>36</sup> An analysis of developed project ideas shows the following themes (one project can address more than one theme): Art & Culture (49%); Environment & Sciences, Digitalisation, Sport & Health, Languages (about 20% each); others: History, Pedagogy, Political Education, VET specialised topics, Inclusion.

## Two examples of school cooperation projects started during an eTwinning Danube Region conference:

### 1

**Project title:** ESCAPE (Enhanced Skills Competence and Practice for the Economy)

- **Duration:** 2014-2017
- **Countries involved:** Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine
- **Content:** The focus of the project was on the Danube Region and job skills. The teachers and pupils analysed and compared the services of job centres in their respective countries. As most partners were vocational schools, they also devoted parts of the project to specific relevant topics, such as tourism, economy, energy, and ecology.
- **Results:** Educational material and specimen lessons were developed for multicultural classes. The eTwinning project was expanded into an Erasmus+ partnership, through which groups of pupils and teachers could visit the other schools. The project was awarded the eTwinning European Quality Label. A follow-up project was started (subsequently called VET4SCAPE).
- Link to the publicly available information about the project: <https://twinspace.etwinning.net/1769/home>.

### 2

**Project title:** Revisiting grandmother's recipes

- **Duration:** 2017-2018
- **Countries involved:** Austria, Czechia, Hungary; later joined by France and Turkey
- **Content:** The main aim of the project was to compare healthy and unhealthy lifestyles from the past and today, and to work out good practices from both. Transforming the "old" recipes into healthier ones included: using in general less fat, sugar and meat, using high-quality fats/oils, using high-quality meat, including legumes and beans, increasing the proportion of vegetables, cooking regionally and seasonally, creating new dishes from leftovers.

- **Results:** The main deliverable of this project is a cookbook, published as an e-book. It contains interviews with the elderly from local communities, the “old” recipes collected and cooked, as well as the transformed recipes exchanged among the schools. The project was awarded the eTwinning European Quality Label and a national prize in Austria. Several follow-up projects involving some of the partners have been carried out (e.g. “Reducing free sugar”, “Eat local, think global”, and others).
- Link to the publicly available information about the project:  
<https://twinspace.etwinning.net/42262/>

After seven years of successful eTwinning Danube Region conferences organised in Austria, the COVID-19 pandemic represented a new challenge. In 2020, the conference was, for the first time, organised completely online. The Austrian eTwinning National Support Organisation prepared a slightly condensed programme for this first online event, while still providing opportunities for structured as well as informal exchange among the participating teachers. The concept proved to be successful – 11 school cooperation projects were designed to connect pupils across the Danube Region and to enable cross-border exchange even in times of distance learning.



Participants of the eTwinning Danube Region Seminar (online – 10-11 June 2021)

© OeAD

In 2021, due to the still uncertain global health situation, the online format was once again implemented, this time expanded and allowing for even more informal exchange. Over the course of two afternoons, participants learned about the EUSDR, about using eTwinning for international school projects and about possibilities offered by the new Erasmus+ programme actions. Participants reflected on their first associations with the river Danube, among which “Europe”, “connection”, “strong” and “different cultures” were the most prominent. In a team-building exercise, the participants created an online collaborative map of their favourite places in the Danube Region<sup>37</sup>. The 54 participants of this second online edition of the eTwinning Danube Region conference developed detailed plans for seven collaborative projects, spanning topics from literature and saving the bees to working with artificial intelligence and developing media literacy.

While the online format has been successful and very well accepted by the participating teachers, all involved eTwinning National Support Organisations in the Danube Region countries hope that face-to-face conferences in Austria will soon be possible again. The projects and connections created every year contribute considerably to the skills of teachers and their pupils in many different areas – languages, intercultural sensitivity, sciences, arts, and others. There is general agreement that this annual event, which contributes to fostering meaningful cooperation among educational institutions of the region, will continue in any case. ●

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<sup>37</sup> The collaborative map created by the participants of the 2021 online edition of the eTwinning Danube Region conference showing their favourite places along the Danube can be seen here: <https://padlet.com/etwinningat/w77bcou1iu2vsioe>.

# Empowering Young People – Connecting Europe: Re-Shaping Life In Our Region

Investing in  
People and Skills

Edited by

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Production of a short film during the project "Empowering Young People – Connecting Europe" (Vienna, Austria - October 2012)

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The project invited secondary schools of the Danube Region to a creative joint venture of thinking and acting together. By involving external partners, our aim was to support schools in the design and implementation of innovative regional projects which empower students to take an active role in the shaping of life in their region by promoting dialogue between cultures, active citizenship and commitment to sustainable development. Empowering Young People – Connecting Europe was a pilot project within Priority Area 9 "To Invest in People and Skills" of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). The project was implemented by KulturKontakt Austria (now part of OeAD) and financed by the European Union and the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Research. The project lasted for two years – from 2012 till mid-2014.

The project supported innovative school-based projects that help young people in understanding and accepting other cultures through cross-cultural interaction in the Danube Region as well as promoting active citizenship through intercultural awareness. Beside this, supporting participation in civil society in their home countries, in the Danube region and in Europe and committing themselves to sustainable development were also aims of the school-based projects.

### **Approaches**

The project preferred methods that were based on discovery because life is an experiment. Learning happens through personal interest and personal experiences, out of inquisitiveness. The philosophy was to support innovative projects that are founded in trust and mistakes are considered a source of learning.

### **Activities**

In the project, participants identified four thematic areas for co-operation. In each of the thematic fields, four schools formed a “cluster” working on one joint project. In four cluster events, the joint project ideas were developed.

In Cluster A – [Active Citizenship](#) “Supporting Vulnerable Groups in Society – Promoting Voluntarism among Students”, schools from Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Moldova, Montenegro and Romania worked on developing knowledge, skills and attitudes of students to participate as volunteers in their local communities and raising their awareness for the situation of vulnerable groups.

The aim of the project was to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes of students as active citizens through supporting people in need, old people, talented students, students with difficulties in Studying/Development as well as raising the society's awareness of the situation of these groups of people. This was done by supporting vulnerable groups of people in the community of the schools to become aware of their potential and to help themselves and encourage them to become active citizens in their turn. The main outputs of the cluster activity were community-based projects, student diaries on the organization of voluntary work, and summary of feedback on it shared through a cluster blog.

In Cluster B – **Cultural Dialogue** “Stories of Everyday Life of Students in Four Countries – an Intercultural Comparison”, schools from Austria, Germany, Serbia and Ukraine aimed to erase frontiers by knowing their similarities and differences.

The aim of the project was to improve multicultural understanding, explore similarities and differences and to promote respect through mutual understanding.

Each school made three short movies dealing with stories about student’s everyday lives in school and in their spare time. The schools gave feedback to the movies and based on the movies reflected on differences, similarities and national stereotypes.

In Cluster C – **Sustainable Development** “Kids Recycle – Awareness Raising Campaigns in Kindergartens for Recycling”, schools from Bulgaria, Germany, Serbia and Slovenia raised awareness for sustainable development.

The students visited two kindergartens per school and there, through workshops, raised awareness of young children for the need of recycling and environmental protection, by e.g. making toys and items from waste (bottles, cardboard and similar waste materials). This project contributed to raising awareness of young students for sustainable consumption and to empower older students to take personal action to contribute to a sustainable project.

Cluster D – **Social Responsibility and Entrepreneurship** “Together for a Job – Youth Campaign against Youth Unemployment in the Danube Region” was a project to change the mind-sets of young people and to raise public awareness for youth unemployment. Schools from Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Moldova, Montenegro and Romania worked on this project.

The main aim of the project was to contribute to changing the mind-sets of youth (regarding entrepreneurship) and entrepreneurs (regarding young people) and to raise public awareness regarding youth unemployment. This has been realised through cooperation between the school and employment agencies/ companies and through public awareness raising measures such as flash mobs and other campaigns.





Students from schools of BFI Vienna producing a short film in the project “Empowering Young People – Connecting Europe” (Vienna, Austria – October 2012)

© OeAD

### Outcomes

In the four regional school clusters, 32 teachers gained experience in regional project development and 80 teachers gained experience in regional project implementation. 400 students actively participated in four projects in fields relevant for the Danube Region and project results were presented to 1,600 stakeholders in ten countries. A “Danube Region Project Portfolio” – an innovative teacher’s guide was produced and was made available to teachers/schools in the Danube Region. ●



# Promoting Inclusive Systems for Early School Leaving Prevention in Europe and Beyond

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The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4<sup>38</sup> aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030. Whereas traditionally inclusive education has referred to a focus on children with special educational needs, educational inclusion is increasingly being examined internationally in broader terms. For example, the UNESCO (2016) report on supporting inclusive education explicitly recognises that inclusion involves a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of socioeconomic marginalization, exclusion or underachievement.

The Conclusions of the Council of the European Union (2015) on reducing early school leaving and promoting success in school<sup>39</sup> explicitly refer to inclusive education as part of a focus on promoting development. The European Commission's Schools Policy Working Group Report 2015 on a whole school approach to early school leaving placed the framework of inclusive education centrally:

Policies to reduce early school leaving should be embedded in an overall inclusive learner-centred vision of education, in which high quality education is accessible to all. In such a vision, schools have a crucial role to play to ensure that all learners reach their full potential for growth irrespective of individual and family-related factors, socio-economic status and life experiences. Schools should be safe, welcoming and caring learning environments, striving for learners' engagement, in which children and young people can grow and develop as individuals and members of the community, feel respected and valued and recognised in their specific talents and needs. (p.8)

In other words, a focus on preventing early school leaving needs to offer a positive vision of promoting change and development in education, through promoting quality environments of schools

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<sup>38</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>

<sup>39</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52015XG1215\(03\)&from=PL](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52015XG1215(03)&from=PL)

focusing on inclusion. Prevention and early intervention are encompassed within a commitment to promote inclusive systems, while also recognising the need to promote and build on strengths for students' agency, mental health and wellbeing.

A framework of promoting inclusive systems for early school leaving prevention examines systems development that goes beyond an individualistic conception of resilience (Downes 2017). A systems focus on inclusion is part of a wider emotional-relational focus on issues pertaining to early school leaving prevention that bridges health and education concerns (Downes, Nairz-Wirth & Rusinaite 2017; Downes 2020). Promoting inclusive systems for engagement, achievement and wellbeing is also underpinned by a human rights framework recognised at EU level, based on equality, non-discrimination, inclusion, respect for diversity, as well as voices of children and marginalised groups (Downes et al. 2017).

This article outlines the following key steps for promoting inclusive systems for early school leaving prevention internationally:

- 1** Bridging Health and Education: Addressing Trauma and Complex Mental Health Needs
- 2** Treating School Bullying as an Early School Leaving Issue
- 3** Public Health Model of Differentiated Strategies in Place – for Meeting Individual Needs at Different Levels of Need/Risk
- 4** Promoting Positive School and Class Climate: Beyond Authoritarian Teaching (Fear and Anger)

## 1

**Bridging Health and Education:****Addressing Trauma and Complex Mental Health Needs**

Over the past decade especially, there is increasing recognition of the educational impact of students' mental health difficulties at the chronic complex needs level. International research has highlighted the key issues of trauma and mental health for early school leaving, including direct links between depression and early school leaving (Quiroga, Janosz, & Bisset 2013). One review of mental health dimensions to early school leaving found that when adjusted for sociodemographic factors, mood disorders (e.g. depression) were significantly related to early school leaving; among anxiety disorders, after controlling for potentially confounding factors, social phobia was a strong predictor of poor educational outcomes, as indicated by early school leavers themselves, such as feeling too nervous in class and being anxious to speak in public (Esch et al. 2014). The EU Commission Evaluation of the Impact of the 2011 Recommendation on Early School Leaving recommends a stronger focus on learners with complex needs (e.g. children with mental health issues, children in care, children with a parent in prison, victims of domestic violence). Without adapting policy to those facing the greatest disadvantages, approaches to early school leaving (ESL) cannot succeed (Donlevy et al. 2019).

It is evident that many strategic policy-making approaches in education and health contexts in Europe do not involve a cross-departmental integrated focus (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop 2014). Some countries have developed multi-disciplinary teams in and around schools, especially for students of highest need (Downes 2011; Edwards & Downes 2013) and are recommended to do so in the Commission's School Thematic Working Group report on Early School Leaving (2013). The Commission Evaluation of the Impact of the 2011 Recommendation on Early School Leaving highlights that in order to tackle the multi-faceted dimension of ESL, it is necessary to facilitate and promote more strategic and cross-sectoral dialogue between policymakers across different fields (e.g. education, health, employment, justice, migration) both at national level (across ministries) and at EU level (across DGs of the European Commission, but also involving other relevant players such as the EU social partners or EU level NGOs) (Donlevy et al. 2019).

## **Treating School Bullying as an Early School Leaving Issue**

Nonstigmatising early monitoring systems to flag risk can be part of a combined strategy for both early school leaving and bullying prevention, where a range of common system supports can apply for both inclusion issues; these common system supports include whole school approaches building a positive school climate, teachers' conflict resolution skills and opportunity for marginalised students' voices, emotional counselling supports and multidisciplinary teams for family support (Downes & Cefai 2016). These issues are also recognised for vocational education and training (Cedofop 2016).

The Commission Evaluation of the Impact of the 2011 Recommendation on Early School Leaving recommends that policies aimed at tackling ESL be further integrated with those targeting anti-bullying as well as mental health and wellbeing, including trauma (Donlevy et al. 2019).

From a loss of wellbeing perspective, bullying victims are likely to experience low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts (Gladstone, Parker & Malhi 2006; Klomek et al. 2007; Nansel et al. 2004; Radliff, Wang & Swearer 2015; Juvonen & Graham 2014; Bjereld et al. 2014). Victimisation (i.e. being bullied) has also been linked to lower academic achievement and other behaviours such as disengagement, absenteeism and early school leaving (Fried & Fried 1996; Glew et al. 2005; Nakamoto & Schwartz 2010). Bullying perpetrators are likely to exhibit other oppositional and anti-social behaviours and to leave school early (Nansel et al. 2003, 2004; Sourander et al. 2011).

It has been found that one standard deviation increases in student- and teacher-reported Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying were associated with 16.5 % and 10.8 % increases in early school leaving counts, respectively, holding all other variables constant (Cornell et al. 2013). A heightened association with early school leaving occurs not simply for those who have been bullied or are bullying perpetrators, but also simply entering a climate of teasing and bullying serves as a push factor for students to leave school early.

There is a striking commonality of interests with regard to strategic approaches for bullying prevention in schools and early school leaving prevention (Downes & Cefai 2016). These have been classified as follows:

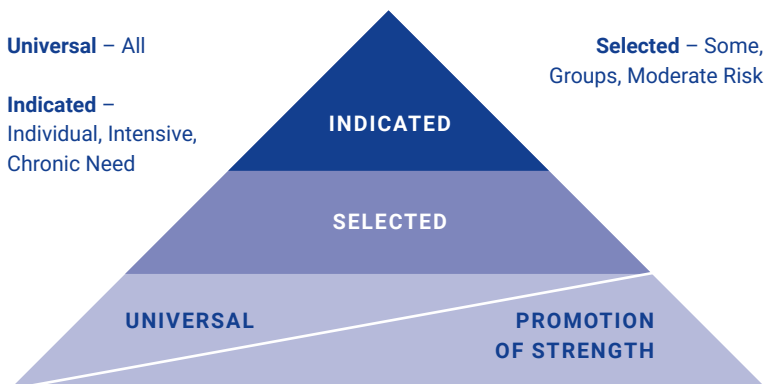
- Direct and indirect effects of bullying on early school leaving relevant to perpetrators, victims and bully/victims (school absence, negative interpersonal relations with peers and conflict with teachers, low concentration in school, decreased academic performance, lower school belonging, satisfaction, and pedagogical well-being, with the effects of bullying exacerbated for those already at risk of early school leaving, negative school climate influences).
- Common systems of supports (transition focus from primary to post-primary, multiprofessional teams for complex needs, language support needs, family support services and education of parents regarding their approaches to communication and supportive discipline with their children, outreach to families to provide supports, addressing academic difficulties).
- Common issues requiring an integrated strategic response, including the prevention of displacement effects of a problem from one domain to another, such as in suspension/expulsion, which may make a bullying problem become an early school leaving problem.
- Common causal antecedents (negative school climate, behavioural difficulties, trauma)
- Teacher professional development and pre-service preparation focusing on developing teachers' relational competences for promoting a positive school and classroom climate, including a focus on teachers' conflict resolution and diversity awareness competences (Downes & Cefai 2016).

This argument for a commonality of system-level response for both bullying and early school leaving prevention is not to state that the same individuals are necessarily at risk for both, though they may share a number of common risk factors. It is to emphasise that a common response to develop inclusive systems (including a curricular focus on Social and Emotional Education, a whole school approach to school climate, bullying, mental health, a focus on teachers' conflict resolution skills, students' voices, parental involvement, multidisciplinary teams etc.) are system support requirements that can directly address the strategic policy of preventing both bullying and early school leaving. They are two sides of the same coin, though other strategies may also be additionally required to address issues and needs specific to bullying and early school leaving as distinct issues (Downes & Cefai 2016).

### 3

#### **Public Health Model of Differentiated Strategies in Place – for Meeting Individual Needs at Different Levels of Need/Risk**

Wellbeing issues in inclusive systems of education need to differentiate universal concerns from those of students experiencing moderate risk or chronic, complex needs (Downes, Nairz-Wirth & Rusinaite 2017). A principle of differentiated need to recognise different layers of complexity, building on public health models of need as universal prevention (all), selected prevention (some, moderate risk, group-based supports) and indicated prevention (few, individual, intensive supports) is gaining fuller recognition in domains such as mental health (Suldo, Friedrich & Michalowski 2010), school violence and bullying (Downes & Cefai 2019) and social work (Hood 2018).



Universal concerns with wellbeing can focus on curricular or school climate dimensions. Moderate risk concerns can identify broad groups in need. This is reflected in the need for disaggregation of data for example by gender, migrant background, Roma and regional differences, in order to provide the basis for more nuanced policy-making (Donlevy et al. 2019). A different strategic level for wellbeing requires supports for students experiencing complex, chronic needs, including trauma and adverse childhood experiences that also encompass poverty. All of these strategic policy levels to address wellbeing in education as part of an inclusive systems approach are relevant to early school leaving prevention.

## 4

**Promoting Positive School and Class Climate:  
Beyond Authoritarian Teaching (Fear and Anger)**

At the universal level, concerns with school climate have been raised as key to transition to secondary school (Madjar & Cohen-Malayev 2016) and central to preschool-primary transition (Cadima et al. 2015). Based on longitudinal studies, student-teacher relationships as a key dimension of school and classroom climate predict later reading and maths achievement (Valiente et al. 2019) and reduction in early school leaving (Quin 2016). The WHO's (2012) international study on student wellbeing has foregrounded the need for caring and responsive teachers and explicitly raised concerns about some teachers publicly humiliating students who perform poorly. Inclusion and exclusion must be recognised as spatial concepts, thus inviting closer scrutiny of schools as systems of relational space (Downes 2020). School and classroom climates and the whole-school system focus thus involve the interrogation of background conditions of relational space that underlie the communicative culture of a school and classroom. There is a need to overcome diametric oppositional spaces of exclusion, hierarchy and us/them divisions across whole school and classroom systems (European Commission, Education and Training Expert Panel 2019; Downes 2020)

Concern with promoting connective relational spaces of assumed connection in whole school approaches to inclusive systems (Cefai, Downes & Cavoni 2021) gains further importance against the heightened experiences of social isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns (Smith et al. 2020) and increasing recognition in Europe of the social isolation of at least some groups of migrants (Janta & Harte 2016). Diametric oppositional splits and an atmosphere of assumed separation must be overcome at whole school systems levels.

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### Active Labour Market Policy

aims at connecting people with jobs. This includes enhancing motivation and incentives to seek employment, improving job readiness and help in finding suitable employment, as well as the expanding of employment opportunities through education and training.

### Capitalisation

in the context of this publication is the valorisation of knowledge and results generated by previous projects in a certain thematic field, aiming to ensure a stronger impact on the policy making process at local, regional, national and European level.

### Cohesion policy

is the policy behind the hundreds of thousands of projects all over Europe that receive funding from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF, related to regional policy), the European Social Fund+ (ESF+, social and labour market policies) and the Cohesion Fund (also known as the European Structural and Investment Funds), as well as the Just Transition Fund (JTF). It aims at promoting economic, social and territorial cohesion, and solidarity among EU Member States. It is the main investment policy of the EU and focuses on investment for jobs and growth and European territorial cooperation (see 'Interreg').

### The European Social Fund (ESF)

invests in people, with a focus on improving employment and education opportunities across the European Union. It also aims to improve the situation of the most vulnerable people at risk of poverty.

## The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)

is the European Union's macro-regional strategy for the Danube region. It is a long-term policy of the European Union to address the challenges of the Danube macro-region. Since 2011 many projects related to four main areas have been founded: Connecting the Danube region (transport, energy, culture, tourism); environmental protection in the Danube region (restoration of water quality, control of environmental risks, preservation of landscape and biodiversity); promoting prosperity (development of the "knowledge society" through research, education and information technology, maintaining the competitiveness of enterprises through the development of clusters and complexes, investing in the development of knowledge and skills of people); strengthening the Danube region (including achieving political stability in the region, working together to ensure security, combating crime).

## Interreg

is the European Territorial Cooperation goal of the EU Cohesion Policy, one of the EU's main investment policies with the goal of alleviating the economic, social and territorial discrepancies in the EU. Interreg programmes facilitate projects within cross-border, transnational and interregional frameworks (as well as in outermost regions), and thereby enhance cohesion in cross-border regions, as highlighted in the EU Treaties.

## A Macro-regional Strategy (MRS)

is a comprehensive framework endorsed by the heads of state or government of the European Union. It addresses common challenges faced by a defined geographical area relating to EU Member States and third countries located in the same geographical area which thereby benefit from strengthened cooperation, which contributes to the achievement of economic, social and territorial cohesion. There are four macro-regional strategies, for the Baltic Sea, the Danube, the Alpine and Adriatic & Ionian regions.

## A Managing Authority (MA)

is responsible for the efficient management and implementation of an Operational Programme, a programme of the EU's Cohesion Policy. It may be a national ministry, a regional authority, a local council, or another public or private body that has been nominated and approved by a Member State. Managing Authorities are expected to conduct their work in line with the principles of sound financial management.

## Priority Area Coordinators (PACs)

are officials or managers appointed by the European Commission/their respective national institutions. In the case of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, they coordinate the work of each area of cooperation ("Priority Area") between the 14 participating countries. For the Priority Area "People and Skills", this means that the 14 countries exchange on their policies and establish cooperation and policy initiatives as well as projects in the fields of labour market policy, education and training, as well as inclusion.



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