

Catching-up regions initiative

POLICY DEVELOPMENT**PRACTICAL MEASURE/INITIATIVE** SLOVAKIA

Timeline

2018 Implementation**2019 Implementation****2020 Implementation****2021 Implementation****2022 Implementation****2023 Implementation****2024 Implementation****ID number 38910**

Background

The Catching-up regions initiative of the European Commission and the World Bank aims to improve competitiveness in low-income and low-growth regions and support Member States to invest and manage European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) better. Cooperation with regional authorities is central to the identification of weaknesses and priority areas to invest in.

After successful implementation in Poland, the initiative was implemented in three regions considered as lagging behind. The regions include many underdeveloped districts, according to the Act on the support of the least developed districts (336/2015); they were also subject to other specific support and investments.

Objectives

Improved VET provision and better alignment to labour market needs can contribute to boosting growth in underdeveloped regions.

Description

The Catching-up regions initiative, in cooperation with regional authorities, aims to identify challenges and priority areas at regional level to direct investments to. Improving VET programmes in line with labour market needs can foster economic development in regions lagging behind.

The initiative was initially carried out in the Prešov region in 2018. In 2019, a report was published providing specific suggestions on how to improve secondary VET. The cooperation with the Banská Bystrica region started in March 2019 and with the Košice region in October 2020.

2018 Implementation

In 2018, the Catching-up regions initiative was carried out in the Prešov region.

2019 Implementation

The most important suggested systemic reform for the Prešov self-governing region, included in the 2019 Catching-up regions overview report, related to the lack of data and institutional support to secondary VET. Therefore, special attention was to be paid to the recommended creation of a 'regional VET platform' that should complement VET governance regional authorities as an advisory body affiliated to the region's school department. It should offer analyses and data, resulting from more effective cooperation among stakeholders from the worlds of education and work to support evidence-based decisions by regional authorities. Peer reviews as a tool to assist self-evaluation of VET schools should be promoted.

In March 2019, the initiative was launched in the Banská Bystrica region. In the first phase of the implementation, the needs of employers and obstacles to speed up the growth of the region were identified, while an analysis of secondary schools was also carried out. The World Bank, together with the regional department of education, identified 21 secondary VET schools, of which eight were prioritised to receive specific support.

2020 Implementation

In December 2020, as a follow-up of the Catching-up regions initiative, a call of the economy ministry was launched to support SMEs and their cooperation with VET schools in the Banská Bystrica region. The budget was EUR 3 million.

Two national ESF projects, Strengthening regional governance in VET towards improving quality, attractiveness and better alignment to the labour market (EUR 6.6 million) and Piloting a model of counselling centres for youth (EUR 3.7 million) were launched in the Banská Bystrica region. The total investment for the first year of the implementation of CURI was set at EUR 46.6 million, of which EUR 43.4 million were a direct benefit for the eight pilot schools.

Based on the experience gained in the first year of implementation of the initiative, the 2021 Action plan for growth and employment was developed. One of its main components focuses on improving the employability of secondary VET school graduates, through two major activities: creating a quality assurance system for VET schools and supporting eight secondary vocational schools selected from a shortlist of 21 schools identified earlier via integrated investment packages tailored to respective school's needs.

In the Košice self-governing region four prioritised areas of support were agreed: improving the quality of secondary education, supporting an innovative environment, accelerating investments and systemic assistance to marginalised Roma communities.

2021 Implementation

After substantial progress in the Prešov region, the Catching-up regions initiative (CURI) initiative has been fully expanded in the Banská Bystrica region and the first steps were being taken in the Košice region.

In the Banská Bystrica region, national ESF projects aimed at strengthening regional governance in VET were launched, with a financial allocation of EUR 6.6 million, and at piloting a model of counselling centres for the young with a financial allocation of EUR 3.7 million, both in compliance with the REACT-EU goals. Within these projects, administrative structures of the self-governing region had been improved. The Education Reform Division recruited four types of specialists responsible for innovation and alignment of the curriculum to labour market needs, school marketing, and inclusion. The work focused on the support of inclusive education at 16 schools. Mentors operate at eight pilot schools and eight schools from at-risk sub-regions. The career centres department supported the activities of 13 district centres that were hubs of cooperation between basic schools, secondary schools and employers aimed

at supporting career guidance in schools and preventing supply-demand mismatch on the labour market.

INNOLAB in Banská Bystrica, currently developed by the self-governing authority to offer a place for pupils and students to learn about innovations in science, will be interlinked within the CURI initiative, with regional youth centres and a network of eight innovative schools.

All pilot schools completed their self-assessment and prepared action plans for improving the quality of VET for the next school year and the related operation manual. Preparation of the national ESF project aimed at quality assessment is in progress in cooperation with the State Institute of Vocational Education. 24 SMEs succeeded with their applications for funding projects aimed at supporting cooperation between SMEs and secondary VET schools, responding to the call of economy ministry Operational programme Integrated infrastructure.

Five VET schools prepared projects aimed at improving their training facilities and innovations in training with an estimated budget of EUR 18.3 million in total.

In the Košice region, activities are being implemented in the least developed districts, of which there are six in the Košice region, namely Gelnica, Rožnava, Sobrance, Trebišov, Košice - surroundings, Michalovce. In cooperation with the World Bank and the European Commission, 70 key employers and 42 secondary vocational schools were approached. Based on cooperation with employers and schools, 8 secondary VET schools were selected for participation in the project, two of which focus on the education of marginalized Roma communities. The goal is to set VET programmes at these eight schools in such a way that they best reflect the needs of future employers and thus improve the employment prospects of their graduates.

The Catching-Up initiative also supports the creation and activities of the "Innovation Center of the Košice Region", interlinking the capacities of the academic world, the public and non-profit sector, and companies to support innovation and thereby "maintain brains" in the east of Slovakia.

For the assistance to marginalized Roma communities cooperation with "Roma communities" Vtáčkovce, Vítkovce and Jasov was agreed. The needs of their residents in the areas of housing, education, employment and health are mapped, which will later be reflected in projects.

In the Prešov region, investment in five pilot schools was in progress. The Secondary VET School of Agriculture, Food and Technology in Kežmarok, received funding for a three-phase investment in a total amount of EUR 6.5 million.

On 16 November 2021, a call was launched by the regional development ministry, within which secondary VET schools from the CURI were eligible to draw from Operational programme Integrated infrastructure - REACT-EU funds.

2022 Implementation

In January 2022, the Action plan to promote economic growth in the Prešov self-governing region (CURI IV) was adopted building on previous activities carried out within Catching-up regions initiative I to III.

It focused on inclusive economic growth through improving the quality of secondary education and lifelong learning and unlocking the workforce potential of the marginalised Roma community. Activity IV.1 of the new action plan aimed at the support for the digitisation of selected regional secondary 'pilot' schools. Support for six pilot communities with a significant Roma population continued during CURI IV through complex interventions, of which enhancement of social enterprises to improve employment opportunities for marginalised and vulnerable groups also opened the door for formal and informal learning opportunities.

In February 2022, the Action plan for growth and employment in the Banská Bystrica self-governing region for 2022-23 (CURI III) building on previous activities carried out

within CURI I and II was adopted.

According to the experts, dual VET was not as effective as it should be due to a comparably low share of dual learners. Reasons for this and the mismatch between supply and demand in the regional labour market should be examined. The World Bank cooperated with the regional and national authorities in preparing and sharing materials and examples of good practice and training for 13 pilot VET schools on selected topics, such as self-assessment, peer-reviewing, school improvement plans, and dual VET. Five out of 13 pilot VET schools were assisted in preparing for project applications, while other eight schools already continued the implementation of the aforementioned projects aimed at investment in the improvement of school equipment and premises. The Banská Bystrica region also piloted innovative solutions to help healthcare workers stay working in Slovakia, assisted by World Bank experts.

In the Košice region, two additional municipalities (Dobšiná and Trebišov) were accepted for cooperation concerning the assistance to marginalised Roma communities in 2022. All municipalities (except Trebišov) elaborated and submitted projects aimed at the support of marginalised Roma communities within a call launched by the interior ministry in the total amount of EUR 17 332 885.

A letter of intent was signed on 20 September 2022 to continue the Catching-up regions initiative in the Banská Bystrica, Košice, and Prešov self-governing regions aimed at strengthening the efficiency and effectiveness of the use of EU funds backed by the action plans for growth and jobs of these regions.

2023 Implementation

In November 2023, a conference at the end of the 4th phase of the initiative discussed results in all three regions. Significant results in improving the learning environment in VET schools are already visible in the Prešov and Banská Bystrica regions which are advanced in implementation compared to the Košice region.

An example of good practice is the successful renewal of the Jozef Murgaš Secondary Industrial School in Banská Bystrica. Within two 2022-23 IROP projects, Modern educational technology centre in support of the digitisation of industry, and Modernisation of school premises for the needs of the establishment of an educational technology centre, EUR 5.39 million for building and reconstruction works and EUR 1.77 million for material and technical equipment were invested. The modern educational centre for ICT and electrical engineering will create the conditions for the creation of a concentrated/innovation and technology zone of specialised classrooms with added value for innovative education with a focus on Industry 4.0, autonomous and robotic technologies, artificial intelligence, software engineering, the mechanical and engineering side of production, and rapid prototyping and 3D technologies. The newly created innovation and technology zone is a space that is also available during out-of-class time/for extracurricular activities for learners from other schools for individual work on projects, and for the public. A creative centre equipped with the most modern professional audiovisual equipment is being built in cooperation with the public TV. Learners specialising in image and sound technology will become acquainted with it within vocational subjects and practice. This makes the school a candidate for developing into a centre of vocational excellence (CoVE).

Within Programme Slovakia 2021-27, the ESF+ call titled Support for vocational education and training within the Catching-up regions initiative was launched on 1 December 2023 for two advanced regions within the initiative. It focused on interlinking the educational system with labour market needs, expanding cooperation with employers, professional development of pedagogical and professional staff, introducing an inclusive culture, and enhancing the marketing activities of selected secondary VET schools established by self-governing regions.

2024 Implementation

The conference 'Modernisation of secondary education and its relevance to the economy in Slovakia and its regions: CuRI contribution', held on 6 February 2024 in

Bratislava, discussed all the results of the initiative in Slovakia. Since 2018, 105 projects have been implemented, 24 are in the pipeline, and EUR 120 million were invested to address challenges in three regions: mismatch in the labour market, skilled labour shortages, weak access to lifelong learning and the inclusion in education of marginalised groups, notably of Roma communities.

Thanks to the initiative, important partnerships between schools, employers and self-governing regions began to be built. These led to the development of joint integrated investment packages, responding to the needs of schools and employers. Small and medium-sized entrepreneurs cooperating with secondary VET schools were also supported. Purchase of technical machinery or software equipment in the total amount of almost EUR 10 million improved practical training directly at the employers' workplaces. 82 study programmes were innovated to adjust to regional needs, and more than 850 innovative outputs in the form of teaching materials were developed.

Within the ESF+ call related to the Catching-up regions initiative, two projects for 2024-27 were approved and launched: Modernisation of secondary education in the Banská Bystrica region, with a budget of about EUR 9.1 million in support of 11 VET schools, and Improvement of secondary vocational education in the Prešov self-governing region II, with a budget about EUR 6 million in support of 10 VET schools. These ESF projects are intended to complement and implement changes identified by the Catching-up regions project in these two regions. In the Košice region, the project focused on priorities outside VET.

According to the Catching-up regions initiative 5 joint action plan, the 5th phase marks the phasing-out stage of the initiative. It supports the completion of previously approved and implemented activities, with no new activities planned. The main aim is to complete ongoing activities, share lessons learnt and disseminate results. This seven-year project will culminate at the final conference to be held in Bratislava Castle on 15 April 2025. World Bank experts will continue providing technical assistance and support to regional authorities. In all three regions, efforts will include the elaboration of the EU funding proposals for solutions enhancing physical inclusivity in schools (such as consultation rooms, and equipping school premises for collaborative small-group work) and strengthening the inclusion of marginalised Roma communities in education.

36 pilot VET schools will benefit or have been already supported with resources and infrastructure to give learners access to up-to-date technologies and equipment strengthening their practical skills. In the Prešov region, in total 15 schools benefitted from the initiative-related investment of about EUR 39 million for construction works and about EUR 10 million for material and technical equipment. In the Banská Bystrica region, in total 13 schools benefitted from the initiative-related investments. In the first period, it was about EUR 21 million for building and reconstruction and EUR 12 million for material and technical equipment for seven schools out of eight pilot schools. In 2024, investment in five new pilot schools and two earlier pilot schools is in progress.

Bodies responsible

- Prešov Self-Governing Region
- Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region
- Košice Self-Governing Region
- Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth
- Ministry of Economy
- Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatisation
- Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport (until 2024)

Target group

Learners

Learners in upper secondary, including apprentices
Young people (15-29 years old)
Learners at risk of early leaving or/and early leavers
Learners from other groups at risk of exclusion (minorities, people with fewer opportunities due to geographical location or social-economic disadvantaged position)

Education professionals

Teachers
Trainers
School leaders
Guidance practitioners

Entities providing VET

Companies
Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)
VET providers (all kinds)

Thematic categories

Governance of VET and lifelong learning

Coordinating VET and other policies
Optimising VET funding
Engaging VET stakeholders and strengthening partnerships in VET
Further developing national quality assurance systems

Modernising VET infrastructure

Modernising infrastructure for vocational training

Modernising VET offer and delivery

Developing and updating learning resources and materials
Reinforcing work-based learning, including apprenticeships

Teachers, trainers and school leaders competences

Systematic approaches to and opportunities for initial and continuous professional development of school leaders, teachers and trainers

Supporting lifelong learning culture and increasing participation

Financial and non-financial incentives to learners, providers and companies
Ensuring equal opportunities and inclusiveness in education and training

Subsystem

IVET CVET

Further reading

[Act No 336/2015 on the support of the least developed districts \[Zákon č. 336/2015 Z. z. o podpore najmenej rozvinutých okresov\]](#)

[Slovakia Catching-up regions overview report \(Prešov region\)](#)

[Action plan for growth and employment in the Banská Bystrica region for 2021](#)

Related policy developments

2024 Implementation

Digital transformation strategy

In the short term, three priority areas have been identified by the strategy, forming a basis for the 2019-22 action plan:



Type of development

Strategy/Action plan

Subsystem

IVET CVET

2024 Implementation

National EQAVET implementation plan

The national EQAVET implementation report (2016-20), containing measures to strengthen quality assurance in IVET, has been prepared. At the end of 2016, ŠIOV, the quality assurance national reference point (QANRP), joined a European project aiming to introduce peer review in the country.



Type of development

Practical measure/Initiative

Subsystem

IVET

2024 Implementation

Supporting teachers in their work with disadvantaged learners

For a long time ESF projects have been crucial in promoting teachers' in-service training regarding assisting disadvantaged learners, including Roma. In 2017, the implementation of the ESF 'Open school for all' project gave a new impulse to this effort.



Type of development

Practical
measure/Initiative

Subsystem

IVET CVET

2024 Implementation

Guidance for young people

The ESF project Dual education and increasing attractiveness and quality of VET launched in 2016 and run by the State Institute of Vocational Education (ŠIOV) aims at improving career guidance and counselling services for learners in VET and those who consider entering this field.



Type of development

Practical
measure/Initiative

Subsystem

IVET

2024 Implementation

Incentives for VET schools to provide practical training

In December 2016, a call was launched to invite proposals for the modernisation of the equipment and premises of school-based practical training (VET schools' workshops and specialised facilities, e.g. libraries).



Type of development

Practical
measure/Initiative

Subsystem

IVET

“ ... ” Cite as

Cedefop, & ReferNet. (2025). Catching-up regions initiative: Slovakia. In

Cedefop, & ReferNet. (2025). *Timeline of VET policies in Europe* (2024 update) [Online tool].

<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/timeline-vet-policies-europe/search/38910>