

1 Introduction

This chapter first outlines the purpose, scope and working methods of the project. It then provides an overview of the analytical approach used in the project, including a description of the context and focus of the action plan to improve higher education in the Slovak Republic. The chapter closes with an outline of the report's structure.

1.1. Purpose and scope

This project is a collaboration between the European Commission's Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM), the Institute for Strategies and Analysis (ISA) in the Government Office of the Slovak Republic, and the Higher Education Policy team in the OECD's Directorate for Education and Skills.

National and international studies have consistently highlighted weaknesses in the quality of the Slovak Republic's higher education system, and the Slovak government has placed the improvement of higher education institutional performance at the centre of its policy agenda. Thus, the purpose of this project is to help Slovak authorities to identify and implement higher education governance and funding reforms that improve the quality of teaching and research in the nation's higher education system. While efficiency and equity are important dimensions of well-functioning higher education systems, they do not form the primary focus of this project.

The project provides a comparative assessment of higher education performance in the Slovak Republic and a targeted action plan that provides ten policy actions in three areas: (i) developing and implementing a co-ordinated higher education strategy, (ii) using funding to support and reward higher education performance, and (iii) enabling responsive institutional governance and management.

1.2. Working methods

This project began in June 2020 and concluded with the release of this report in November 2021. The European Commission-Slovak Republic-OECD project team established a Slovak Working Group to provide regular input on the project. It was composed of policy makers from the Ministry of Education (MoE), the Institute for Education Policies, the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (SAAHE) and the Research Agency. It met four times, providing input in June 2020 on the project plan and fact-finding activities; in October 2020 to provide input on the OECD's preliminary diagnosis and policy directions; in January 2021 to discuss recent higher education developments in the Slovak Republic, their relevance to the project and discuss implementation considerations for reforming the governance and funding of higher education, and in June 2021 to provide feedback on the recommended policy actions presented in this report.

Between September 2020 and March 2021, several activities were organised by the OECD, with the participation as observers of the European Commission's DG REFORM, the Slovak Government Office and an independent local expert. These included:

- interviews with 28 key stakeholders, including higher education institution (HEI) leaders, staff and students, as well as representatives from the business, innovation and research ecosystem
- a peer-learning webinar with presentations from six international experts from Austria, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Portugal and the United States to share insights about reforming higher education governance and funding from a policy and institutional perspective, that brought together about 100 Slovak participants
- institutional roundtable discussions with 17 stakeholders from 5 Slovak higher education institutions, including leaders, academic and professional staff and students.

This report and action plan use several sources of information:

- OECD and European Union international datasets
- background information and select data provided by an independent local expert and reviewed by the Slovak Working Group, describing the Slovak higher education system's key features and performance

- stakeholder input received through bilateral interviews and institutional roundtables
- comparative analysis based on international expert input and desk-based comparative research

1.3. Analytical approach

Higher education performance

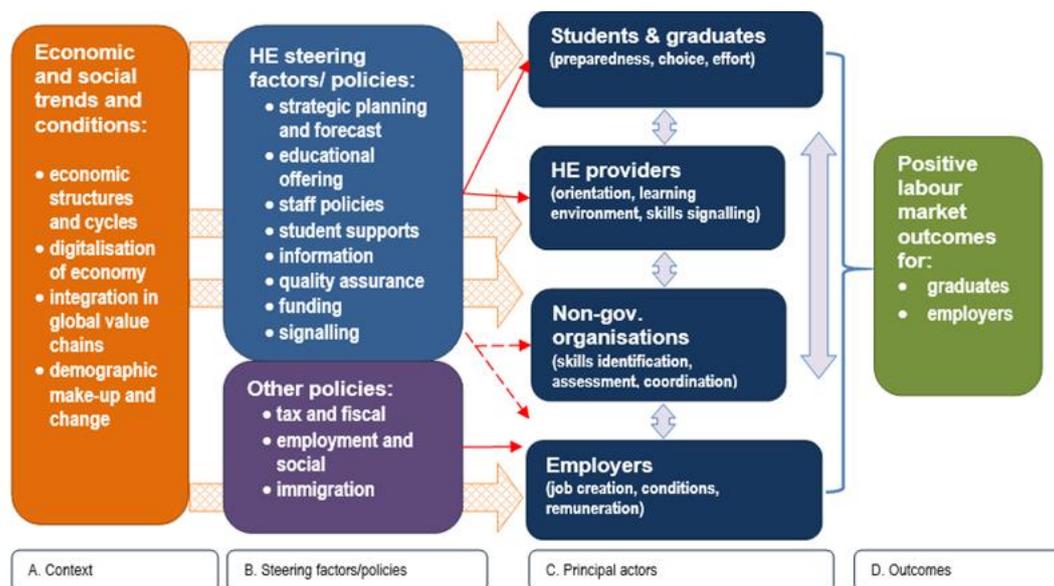
Performance in higher education involves three dimensions: the efficiency of higher education systems – the output achieved for a given level of financial and human inputs; its quality – the value of outputs achieved against widely agreed indicators or procedures; and its equity – the distribution of higher education opportunities and benefits among all learners (OECD, 2020^[1]).

Achieving an efficient, high-quality and equitable higher education system poses significant challenges to governments and higher education institutions across OECD countries. Higher education systems have to cope with the rapid expansion of higher education systems (as well as sharp reductions in some countries in recent years), the rising costs of higher education and growing demands placed on HEIs to meet the needs of the individuals and communities they serve, including an increasingly diverse student population and employers with new and fast-changing skills demands (OECD, 2019^[2]).

This project focuses primarily on the quality of higher education, both at the national level, by examining quality in a comparative perspective, and at the institutional level, by examining the types of measures that government and HEIs could use to identify and measure quality, and the policies that could be used to support and reward quality.

Multiple factors shape the ability of HEIs to achieve quality outcomes across their core missions – teaching, research and engagement. Below we map out these factors and their interplay as they shape one important outcome of higher education systems: the labour market outcomes of graduates (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1. Factors affecting outcomes for graduates and employers



Source: OECD (2020^[3]), *Labour Market Relevance and Outcomes of Higher Education in Four US States*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/38361454-en>, Figure 1.1.

The analysis in this report recognises that the performance of Slovak HEIs must be assessed in light of the economic and social context that shapes the actions of institutions and the outcomes they can achieve.

It focuses on the actions that government can take to steer the actions of HEIs, support and reward quality improvements, and enable institutional governance and management processes and practices that are responsive to the needs of higher education stakeholders and the broader Slovak society.

Context and focus of the action plan

Recent international and national studies highlighting the need to improve the quality of the higher education system provided a wide range of recommendations for system improvement, placing a particular focus on the governance and funding of the system (see in particular the European Commission's Peer Counselling on the Governance of Higher Education Institutions in the Slovak (2018^[4]) and the Learning Makes Sense study (To dá rozum) (2021^[5]), discussed in Chapter 3, Box 3.4).

In addition, over the course of 2020 and 2021, the Slovak government has identified higher education reform as a key policy priority to support the country's economic prosperity and social well-being. Its vision for higher education was most recently set out in the "Modern and Successful Slovakia" plan (Moderné a Úspešné Slovensko). The plan aims to "increase the performance of Slovak universities, promote their diversification, focus on inclusion, international co-operation and collaboration with the private sector, so that the universities can contribute to reinforcing the quality of human capital, social inclusion, and the innovation potential of the Slovak Republic, increased economic competitiveness, economic growth and sustainable jobs" (Government of the Slovak Republic, 2021^[6]).

The Slovak Republic's national Recovery and Resilience plan was prepared in the spring of 2021 in the context of the European Commission's Resilience and Recovery Facility (RRF). The RRF is a large-scale financial instrument to "help [member states] repair the immediate economic and social damage brought about by the coronavirus pandemic" and help ensure "a sustainable and inclusive recovery that promotes the green and digital transitions" (European Commission, 2021^[7]).

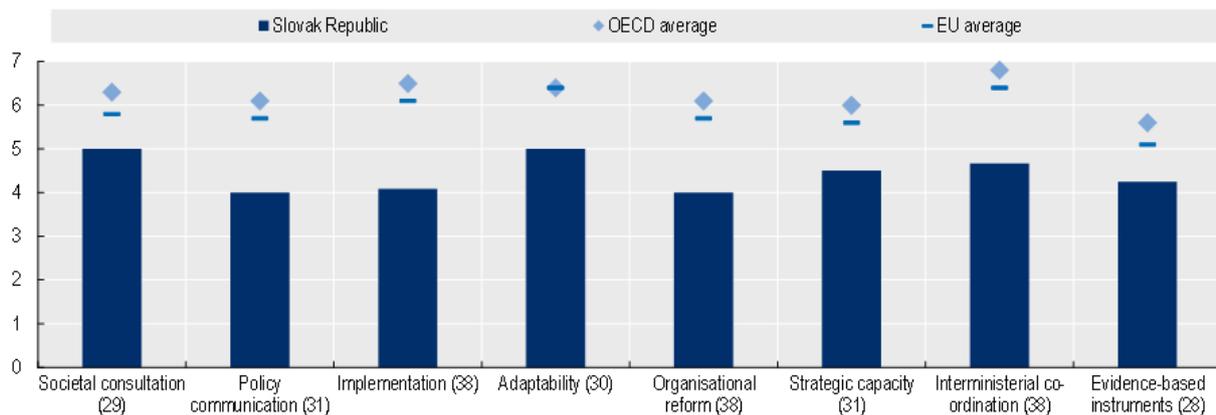
The government's new vision for higher education complements existing reform plans, most notably a government-led proposal to make important changes to the Higher Education Act, with a particular focus on modifying the internal governance structure of higher education institutions (HEIs). The government has announced plans to submit an amendment to the national parliament and adopt an amended act by the end of 2021.

Against this policy backdrop, this action plan aims to help the Slovak government in three ways. It aims to help Slovak authorities: 1) refine their current policy plans in light of the OECD's analysis; 2) consider additional actions that could help achieve the government's goal of a higher quality higher education system; and 3) carefully prepare for the successful implementation of higher education reform.

Furthermore, implementation – the process by which policy objectives translate into actions that result in changes in practice – is a major focus of this action plan. This is a priority because previous OECD work suggests that fragile implementation planning has often hindered the effectiveness of education and skills reforms in the Slovak Republic (OECD, 2020^[8]). While this challenge is not unique to higher education, it is of particular relevance, as the Slovak government considers large-scale, complex higher education reforms to address the wide range of problems the country faces in this field, as presented in Chapter 2.

Previous analysis of policy making in the Slovak Republic underpins the need for a strong focus on implementation. For instance, according to the Sustainable Governance Indicators (SGI) compiled annually for 41 OECD and European Union (EU) countries by the Bertelsmann Foundation (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020^[9]), the Slovak Republic ranks 38 out of 41 in terms of the effectiveness of its policy implementation, adequacy of its institutional arrangements and co-ordination across institutional lines of government decision making (see Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2. Executive capacity in the Slovak Republic compared to OECD/EU countries (2020)



Note: These indicators are not specific to education policy. National experts give scores on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest). The number in parentheses represents the rank of the Slovak Republic among 41 OECD and EU countries.

Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung (2020^[9]), *Sustainable Governance Indicators 2020*, <https://www.sgi-network.org/2020/>.

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1.4. Structure of the report

The report contains two further chapters and two annexes.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the Slovak Republic's higher education system's key features and its higher education performance from a comparative perspective.

Chapter 3 contains an action plan to improve higher education in the Slovak Republic. This action plan, which includes ten policy actions across three pillars, aims to provide a roadmap for the Slovak government to implement higher education reform in a carefully sequenced manner. Each pillar can be regarded as an action step in the reform process. These include:

1. developing and implementing a co-ordinated higher education strategy;
2. using funding to enable and reward higher education performance; and
3. enabling responsive institutional governance and management.

For each pillar (or action step), we provide:

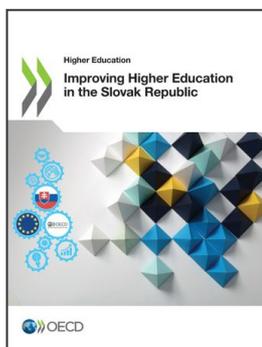
- a review of current policies and practices
- a discussion of challenges limiting the adoption of effective reforms
- relevant international experience that points to possible policy reforms, and
- a set of concrete policy actions that the Slovak government may wish to consider.

Annex A presents two in-depth case studies of higher education reforms in Portugal and Finland relevant to the areas of reform discussed in this report and considered by the Slovak authorities. These case studies offer insights on the reform context in Portugal and Finland, the policy design and implementation process, and outlines some lessons learnt that the Slovak Republic may consider alongside the policy actions recommended in the action plan.

Annex B provides a list of organisations that participated in the project's stakeholder interviews and roundtable discussions.

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