

Statement of commitment to the process of transforming education in the Republic of Serbia

Your Excellency, Secretary-General of the United Nations,

Thank you for holding the *Global Transforming Education Summit* in this crucial period of recovery from the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby launching a joint global action aimed at reducing inequality in access to education and increasing the quality of education for all.

The Government of the Republic of Serbia is fully committed to building an inclusive and equitable education system in Serbia that will provide all children with quality education, while respecting the recommendations of all participants in the consultation process on the transformation of education in the Republic of Serbia.

In accordance with *Agenda 2030* and the *Education Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia until 2030*, our vision of education development is to provide quality education in order to realise the full potential of the population, especially every child and young person in the Republic of Serbia, while the mission of education in the Republic of Serbia is to provide high-quality education in the service of the development of society at large.

In 2020, the world faced an unprecedented challenge - a health crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Major fundamental changes took place at almost all levels of functioning of our society.

Our response to the COVID-19 pandemic shows that the education system was able to adapt quickly to dramatic and sudden changes. During the pandemic, we managed to ensure almost universal participation in continuous education through impressive adaptation to distance teaching and learning (lessons aired by the public broadcaster, use of online platforms, IT tools and solutions). At the same time, we were aware of the challenge of making distance classes accessible to students from vulnerable groups.

The experience of organising distance teaching during the pandemic has shown us that the majority of students still believe that the best type of teaching is the one organised exclusively in the classroom, while a number of parents believe that distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic caused losses in students' achievements.

When it comes to preschool education, this system also demonstrated flexibility and willingness to face challenges constructively and to adapt the organisation of work of preschool institutions to the specific circumstances during the epidemic. The Ministry, in cooperation with relevant actors, prepared a set of recommendations and instructions, and, in the light of the new circumstances, support in the area of professional development of staff was designed. Preschool institutions provided support to families from vulnerable social groups, and, at the local level, closely cooperated with relevant services - local emergency teams, competent public health institutes, health centres, centres for social work, etc.). In situations where institutions could not work, they provided support to families and developed an authentic, unique model of support for children and families.

The preparation of preschool institutions and the planning of different modalities of work organisation in line with the epidemiological situation in the field required a high level of professionalism and coordinated efforts of all relevant actors at the local community level. In parallel with that, preschool institutions participated in processes, project initiatives and activities (IPA 14 project; inclusive preschool education project, etc.), which, with the support of relevant partners and institutions, contribute to the realisation of strategic priorities in the activity.

On the other hand, the major change in the manner we organised education during the COVID-19 pandemic also pointed to numerous possibilities for improving access to education and education quality, such as increasing the digital literacy of students and teachers, reducing the digital gap, developing creative teaching methods, etc.

In accordance with your guidance, we organised national consultations, and on the occasion of the global transforming education summit, with the aim of agreeing on the future vision of education and reinforcing the overall commitment of society to the development of education, and thereby contributing to the achievement of global goals related to education by 2030. In open discussions with all relevant stakeholders, Serbia recognised education as the most important public good and human right, representing the foundation for building a more prosperous, peaceful and sustainable society.

During the national consultations on the transformation of education, we agreed on the following:

We stand for joint activities, actions, solutions and solidarity in order to build a society that will provide access to quality lifelong education for every citizen of Serbia. Through the joint action of all parts of society, we will contribute to the recovery from losses associated with the pandemic and thus renew efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 by 2030 - Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

We focus on the key changes we identified and agreed upon during the consultation process for the transformation of education by 2030:

- Raising the competences of teaching staff (including ICT competences);
- Connecting the education sector with the labour market (strengthening the practical experience of students);
- Investing in scientific research capacities of teaching staff and students;
- Improvement of infrastructure (teaching premises, information systems, computer and laboratory/specialised classroom equipment, server equipment);
- Facilitating access to educational institutions (schools/colleges) by removing architectural, communication and all other barriers for students with disabilities.

We recognise that poor learning outcomes are closely correlated with socio-economic status and geographic location, which is why we will provide long-term financial and non-financial support to the process of inclusive education at all levels and thus contribute to the development of quality education accessible to every student in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Providing systemic support to students during their education journey is a national priority, with an emphasis on students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds and vulnerable social groups. We will pay special attention to the development of empathy with inclusive education, the increase of teachers' knowledge about anti-discrimination and the promotion of inclusive education in society and schools.

We are committed to ensuring equal access to education for all children, including lifelong learning for all. We will pay special attention to gender equality issues in the education system - from access to quality programmes to the development of programmes that will promote gender equality principles.

We strongly support further development of inclusive education at all levels, as a particularly important principle of SDG 4. This is in line with the national Education Strategy, which states that "the introduction of inclusive education requires changes at the national, local and institutional level, including the reform of education funding and management" and building the missing "adequate inclusive education funding mechanisms". In addition, we will improve the conditions for lifelong learning (Objective 1.8 of the Education Development Strategy) by developing a system of recognition of prior learning, transparency and comparability of the qualification system, encouraging dialogue and developing social partnerships and establishing Regional Training Centres.

We encourage the development of education based on scientific facts that will enable students to understand the phenomena and processes around them and thus be resistant to manipulation, fake news, pseudoscience, as well as to explore and critically view the world around them. The path towards achieving this goal involves changing the value system in the education system and placing students in the centre of this system.

We are committed to connecting the education sector with the labour market, encouraging critical and analytical thinking and understanding among students, while promoting interdisciplinarity and thematic connection during learning. TES consultations identified a gap in the perception of the quality of education, where most teachers believe that the curricula they implement in schools enable the acquisition of skills for the 21st century, while other actors, including young people, demand the modernisation of teaching methods by using ICT competencies. To realise this vision, it is necessary to develop a culture of lifelong learning, transformation of learning and teaching in the direction of developing critical thinking, media and IT literacy, education in accordance with scientific, technical and technological achievements and principles of sustainable development.

We work on improving the initial education of school and preschool teachers and continuously raising the competencies of teaching staff, including ICT competencies, while modernising teaching methods. Our goal is to increase the quality of teaching and learning, equity and accessibility of pre-university education, and to strengthen the pedagogical function of education institutions, through improving the quality of the initial education of preschool and school teachers (Objective 1.5 of the Education Strategy) and improving the quality of the system for continuous professional development of school and preschool teachers and expert associates (Objective 1.6 of the Education Strategy).

We invest in the development of inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Today, Serbia spends a relatively modest portion of its public resources on education, and spending on education is below the United Nations benchmark. TES consultations in Serbia demonstrate a high level of consensus among stakeholders on the need for more significant investments in education at all levels. In order to achieve SDG 4 in the Republic of Serbia, we will increase allocations for the development of education. Improvement of education infrastructure (teaching premises, information systems, computer and laboratory/specialised classroom equipment, servers) including improved accessibility of education infrastructure (removal of architectural, communication and all other barriers for students with disabilities) was identified as a policy priority during the TES consultations. In accordance with the commitments under the National Education Strategy, we will provide "adequate funding and a flexible funding model for targeted

measures related to increasing efficiency, effectiveness and equity in education, including intersectoral funding models for integrated additional support services for children."

We improve the foundations for the development of digital education by improving the digital competencies of teachers and students, as well as through the pedagogical application of digital technologies in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning. We will focus special attention on the application of the Integrated Education Information System (IISP) and the use of data in making decisions about education. Despite the challenges of online learning during the pandemic, the vast majority of consultation participants argue that digital tools should be used more often or always in the educational process, and that hybrid teaching is a good model to consider in the context of future forms of education, which is also in line with Objective 1.3 of the Education Development Strategy (Foundations for the development of digital education at the pre-university level in place), as well as with Objective 2.4 (Digitalisation of higher education).

We promote education as a pillar and accelerator of sustainable development and implementation of Agenda 2030 in Serbia. The future development of education in Serbia entails the strengthening of an intersectoral approach and the establishment of mechanisms at the national and local level for coordinated implementation of policies and measures that directly or indirectly concern education - the establishment of an intersectoral approach and stronger links among the education sector and other sectors such as social protection and employment, youth, economy, culture, finance, etc. Also, the school itself should be a place of cooperation – among teachers, students and school management. TES consultations showed us that students expect from schools to involve them more in school life, by asking for their opinion and allowing them to participate in decision-making related to the organisation of school, teaching, extracurricular activities, as well as everything else related to their school life. The students tell us that "it is important how we feel at school because that is where we spend most of our time."

We assure you that Serbia remains committed to achieving the SDGs by 2030 and regularly monitoring the SDG indicators. We remain committed to realising the strategic vision of education - ensuring quality education for the purpose of realising the full potential of every child, young person and adult in the Republic of Serbia.