

Enhancing effectiveness and private sector participation in Serbia's Sector Skills Councils



Summary

To better align vocational education with job market needs in Serbia, it was recognised that Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) were facing challenges due to limited business involvement. In response, People 1st International collaborated with local stakeholders to evaluate and improve the system. This partnership aimed to enhance the connection between vocational training and employer needs, creating a more responsive and effective educational landscape.

Background

In 2021, the Serbian Government launched a Strategy for Education Development aimed at improving educational quality, aligning education with societal and labour market needs and enhancing vocational education through the National Qualifications Framework of Serbia (NQFS). A crucial part of this strategy was the establishment of Sector Skills Councils, designed to bridge the gap between education and industry.

To maximise the effectiveness of the SSCs, specific governance improvements are essential. Attention must be given to increasing private sector representation and clearly defining SSC roles to align skills with employer demands and eliminate redundant qualifications. Strengthening private sector engagement will enhance the connection between vocational education and industry needs, while streamlining decision-making can improve responsiveness to sector requirements.

Our solutions

People 1st International, with local partners and support from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), conducted a comprehensive assessment of the existing SSC structure. The assessment involved desk research, stakeholder mapping, surveys and focus group discussions with over 170 employers and 166 key stakeholders across 19 sectors.

Client: EBRD

“People 1st International's experience and expertise in setting up and operating SSCs greatly contributed to the ambitious task of redesigning the SSC model in Serbia. On the back of this successful project, we expect to see the model applied across the SSCs in the country and also hope to further partner with People 1st International in order to contribute to necessary legal reforms to enable the implementation of the new model to a full extent.” - Dragana Marjanovic, Economic Inclusion Specialist, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development

“One of the standout recommendations from People 1st during the project's first phase is the formation of technical expert groups (TEGs), which we see as a promising approach. These groups have the potential to streamline expertise, improve how the councils operate and ensure that decisions about qualification standards are well-informed and focused. With the work of the sector skill councils thoroughly analysed and the recommendations proving very valuable, we decided to continue our cooperation with People 1st to implement these recommendations further.” - Dr Vesna Fabian, Acting Assistant Director, National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and Office for Dual Education

The key solutions implemented were:

1. New subcommittees and technical expert groups

The project successfully established specialised subcommittees and technical expert groups within the SSCs to meet sector-specific needs. Comprising industry professionals, these groups offer valuable insights into curriculum development, competency standards and labour market trends. This focused approach empowers SSCs to effectively address both current and future skills gaps, fostering a more responsive and dynamic workforce.

2. Guidance toolkit and clear framework

A guidance toolkit was created to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of SSC members, including those from the private sector. This structured framework enhances accountability and decision-making while equipping the Qualifications Agency with tools to support SSC operations, from meeting coordination to fostering industry engagement.

3. Private sector engagement and communication strategy

A communication toolkit was launched to boost private sector involvement by raising awareness of SSCs and their benefits to employers. Through targeted outreach campaigns, the project encouraged businesses to engage more actively in SSC discussions and decision-making, fostering a vibrant partnership between industry and education.

4. Training and capacity building

A series of dynamic training workshops were held to equip SSC members with the essential skills and knowledge needed for effective role fulfilment. Participants received guidance on utilising labour market data, managing SSC subcommittees and fostering better coordination between education providers and industry. These workshops not only imparted valuable skills with attendees feeling motivated, recognising the role they play in shaping a successful future for vocational education. These sessions laid a strong foundation for ongoing engagement and partnership, reinforcing a shared commitment to bridging the gap between education and workforce needs.

Outcome

The initiative has successfully enhanced private sector involvement by establishing subcommittees and technical expert groups, empowering employers to directly shape qualifications and training programmes. This streamlined structure has increased the efficiency of SSCs, enabling a focus on industry-relevant outcomes and effectively addressing specific skills gaps. Furthermore, the Serbian Qualifications Agency and stakeholders have secured funding to broaden the SSC model across more sectors, ensuring sustained private sector participation and progress in vocational education. Overall, the project has created a robust foundation for aligning educational qualifications with labour market needs, significantly boosting student employability and enhancing workforce productivity in key sectors.