COUNTRY NOTE

ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA (2023)

1. ABOUT THIS COUNTRY NOTE

This country note presents a snapshot of findings on adult education in Bosnia and Herzegovina: on access to and prospective demand for adult education, on adult skills and competences, and on the extent to which opportunities for lifelong learning benefit specific groups of adult learners (women and adults at risk of socio-economic disadvantage).

The country note is based on evidence collected each year for monitoring purposes through KIESE[1] and the Torino Process[2] – two annual ETF initiatives which track developments in the domains of education, skills, and employment in countries - partners of the ETF. In the context of these initiatives, adult education is an element of the broader concept of lifelong learning and may refer to any formal, non-formal, or informal learning activity, both general and vocational, undertaken by adults after leaving initial education and training.

The findings in this note focus on policy and system performance in support of adult education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as on the learners. The note does not provide a description of adult education arrangements in the country. Where necessary and appropriate, the note may draw on information from third-party reports.

2. ADULT EDUCATION IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

2.1 Gauging demand for adult education

Understanding demand for adult education is an important prerequisite for crafting relevant educational programmes and policies. It allows to identify which adult populations need learning opportunities, helping policymakers and practitioners create and provide courses that fill specific skills gaps and meet personal and career aspirations.

So far, there is no uniform, internationally agreed-upon metric for measuring demand for adult education. To gauge the educational needs and aspirations of prospective adult learners, one can leverage existing data sources for a blend of indirect indicators instead. Which indirect indicators, however?

Assuming that education and training in a country can be judged by how it treats those most in need, focusing on indicators related to vulnerable adults – the long-term unemployed, the economically inactive, and those with low or no educational attainment – can be a promising strategy to understand the broader demand for adult education. Giving attention to these groups can serve as a useful proxy of wider educational and training needs across the workforce. The extent to which countries succeed

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[1] The Key Indicators on Education, Skills and Employment (KIESE) are a collection of statistics that form part of a broader set of information proposed by the ETF to enable a review of developments in the field of education, skills and employment in the partner countries.

[2] The Torino Process is a multiannual review of policy and system performance in support of lifelong learning through vocational education and training (VET) in countries in East and South-East Europe (including Turkey), Central Asia, and the South and East Mediterranean region. The Torino Process is carried out in partnership with countries in these regions on a regular basis since 2010.

in providing these groups with access to training and meeting their educational needs can significantly influence both the demand for and the supply of skills in the labour market.

This is particularly relevant for ETF partner countries, where the proportion of adults at risk of vulnerability and socio-economic disadvantage can be significant. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the data reveals that more than 50% of the adult population is out of the labour force, as shown in Figure 1, indicating a significant issue with economic inactivity. Additionally, close to 30% of the adult population has low educational attainment, a high proportion compared to other countries in the sample. In any country, the lower-skilled and less-educated adults are usually most at risk of unemployment.

Figure 1. Demand for education: vulnerable and at-risk population in working age (2022 or latest available year)
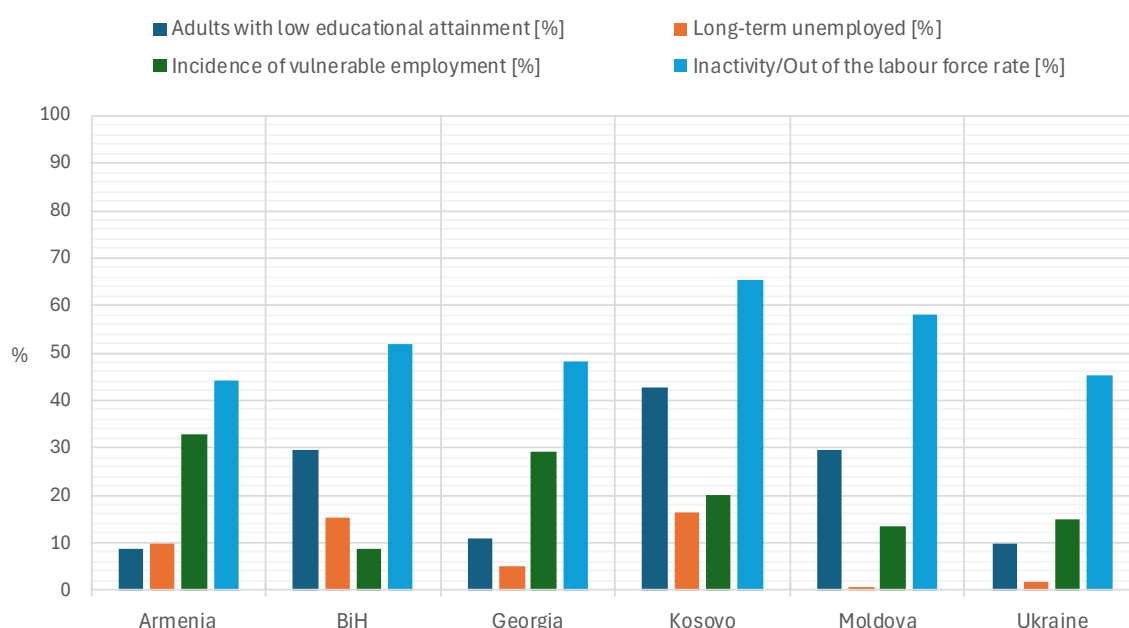
Source: ETF KIESE database

Notes: Reference year before 2022 for Armenia is 2017 (long-term unemployment). Reference years before 2022 for Bosnia and Herzegovina are 2018 (long-term unemployment) and 2021 (educational attainment and inactivity). Reference year before 2022 for Georgia is 2018 (long-term unemployed). Reference years before 2022 for Kosovo are 2019 (long-term unemployment) and 2020 (educational attainment). Reference year before 2022 for Moldova is 2018 (long term unemployment). Reference years before 2022 for Ukraine are 2018 (long-term unemployment for age group 15-70), 2021 (vulnerable employment for age group 15-70) and 2021 (educational attainment and inactivity).

Another group that may benefit from upskilling and reskilling includes the long-term unemployed, who account for around 15% of active adults. While the high incidence of long-term unemployment indicates inefficiencies within the labour market, individuals facing prolonged joblessness have a comparatively lower risk of socio-economic vulnerability than those entirely disengaged from the workforce or with minimal educational achievements. This perspective suggests that, despite their challenges, long-term unemployed adults may have more accessible paths to re-enter the job market or engage in further training.

The data also show that less than 9% of the adult population is at risk of vulnerable employment, the smallest among the groups of vulnerable adults in the country, as illustrated in Figure 1. Furthermore, this rate of vulnerable employment is comparatively lower than that of any other country included in this note.

However, understanding the labour market in Bosnia and Herzegovina—and, through this analysis, the true demand for adult education—requires considering additional factors such as population composition, migration patterns, and the prevalence of the informal sector. These elements can significantly influence labour market statistics, potentially obscuring the actual need for upskilling and reskilling programmes. Therefore, it is important to contextualise the upskilling and reskilling efforts within the broader socio-economic and labour market dynamics in the country, taking into account factors such as population composition, migration patterns, and the informal sector, to truly address and meet the needs of the long-term unemployed.

2.2 Access to and participation in adult learning

Access to learning emerges as a significant issue in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It appears to be below the average for other countries in the Torino Process monitoring (hereafter "international average"). Additionally, there appears to be a noticeable discrepancy in the degree to which IVET is accessible and attractive compared to CVET, with IVET being the most attractive option.

In accordance with the VET laws and the laws of craft in the Federation of BiH, Republika Srpska, and Brcko District BiH, CVET programs are accessible in both public and private institutions for various vocations. Despite being legally accessible, both VET subsystems show low capacity and performance in terms of enabling and promoting learner access, which suggests that there is significant scope for improvement. Learners in the working age typically do not enrol in CVET programs unless required for their jobs. In addition, the overall legal framework is not favourable to the creation of new adult education programmes or the registration of new independent learning providers.

Unfortunately, the struggle to participate in adult education is not limited to VET programmes. It is a systemic issue impacting various adult learning paths and extending to adult learning opportunities such as those provided in the context of active labour market policies. At the same time, Bosnia and Herzegovina performs well in supporting those enrolled in VET programmes, reducing dropout rates, and facilitating transitions between consecutive tracks of education and training.

When looking at system performance in support of access from a gender perspective, that data reveals that the challenges with access in the VET system in Bosnia and Herzegovina are particularly pronounced for adult female learners. The system is more accessible to young people than to adult women, highlighting a significant area of concern, especially for women in rural areas who face greater barriers to access.
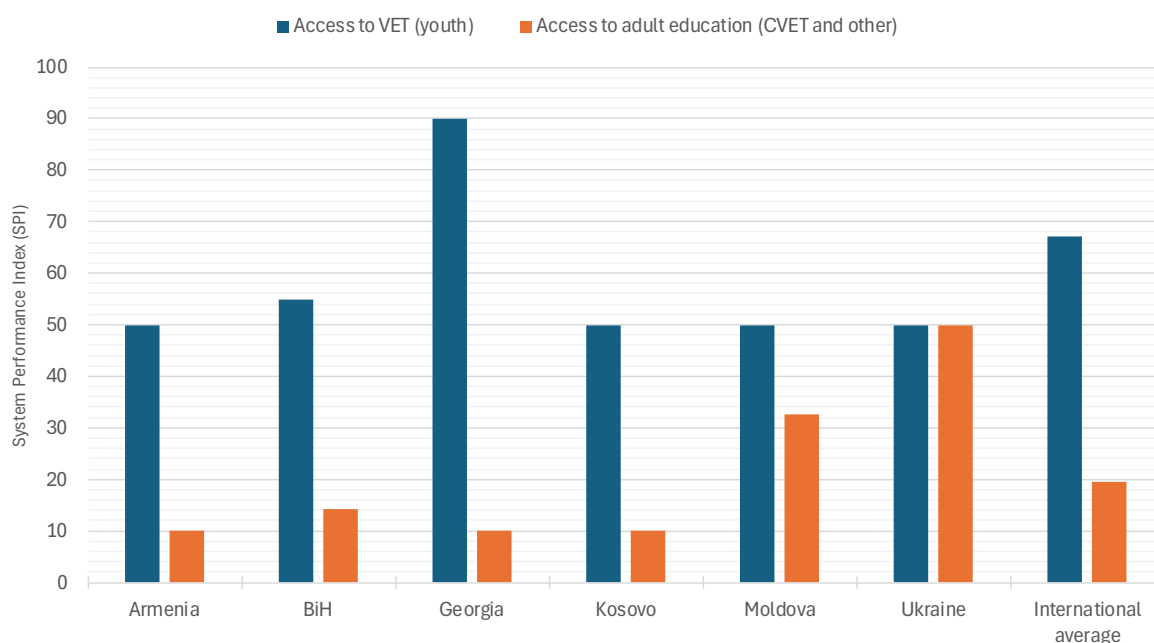
Despite these obstacles, once enrolled, adult female learners demonstrate resilience and tend to progress more successfully than their younger counterparts. This observation suggests a gender disparity that might disadvantage male learners in terms of participation and graduation rates within the VET system, indicating both progress and areas for further improvement in gender equality in vocational education and training

The monitoring data indicates that access to learning within the VET system varies significantly among adult learners, with long-term unemployed individuals showing a notably higher engagement compared to the average adult learner and other vulnerable groups, such as economically inactive adults and those with low educational attainment.

The better performance in support of access for the long-term unemployed can be attributed to the concerted efforts of key stakeholders in the education and labour market system, including public employment services (PES), VET schools, higher education institutions, local communities, chambers of commerce, and companies. These stakeholders actively facilitate the provision of opportunities in CVET for these individuals through targeted programmes and public calls. While CVET options are also

available to other groups of adult learners, including the average adult, these opportunities frequently remain underutilised due to their limited attractiveness or the perceived relevance of the programs.

Figure 2. Access to learning for youth and adults (2023): index of policy and system performance

Notes: The System Performance Index SPI is a metric of performance calculated on the basis of quantitative and qualitative data collected annually through the Torino Process. It ranges from 0 (min/low performance), to 100 (max/high performance). International average refers to the average of countries which participate in the 2023 round of Torino Process policy and system performance monitoring. These countries are Albania, Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Georgia, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Moldova, Montenegro, Morocco, North Macedonia, Palestine, Serbia, Tunisia, Turkey, and Ukraine.

To enhance employability and facilitate workforce integration, it is also necessary to look into career guidance. Effective career guidance is integral to making adult education and VET more accessible and attractive by providing individuals with tailored advice, information on available opportunities, and support in navigating their career paths.

Bosnia and Herzegovina puts considerable emphasis on the provision of career guidance as a way to equip learners with the necessary knowledge to navigate their professional journeys effectively. According to information provided by national authorities in the course of the Torino Process monitoring, the provision of career guidance is considered to be at a satisfactory level and the VET system does well in offering up-to-date information about professions and education programmes, enabling prospective and current students in VET to make informed decisions regarding their education and employment paths.

While there has been progress, more needs to be done to enhance the standards, quality of service provision, and the effectiveness of career guidance and its monitoring. The concept of career guidance is currently too narrow, lacking a universal definition and a coherent implementation strategy across various life stages. Its primary focus is on secondary students, with Public Employment Services (PES) offering counselling that saw participant numbers nearly double from 62,258 in 2019 to 121,014 in 2022. However, training for the unemployed has seen a decline, dropping from around 1,000 participants in

2019 to just 300 in 2022. Moreover, despite the presence of active labour market measures in Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as skills development and employment incentives, their reach is limited, engaging only a small percentage of the unemployed population (16,000 out of 350,000 in 2022), highlighting the need for more inclusive and comprehensive approaches.

2.3 Quality and relevance of skills and competences

The VET system of Bosnia and Herzegovina struggles to delivering quality to both young and adult learners. Adult learners in the country tend to possess basic skills and key competencies more frequently than younger learners, but their level of development is lower compared to the average of other countries participating in the Torino Process. Additionally, the lack of a regular, comprehensive monitoring system for adult education makes proficiency evaluation a challenge for practitioners and decision-makers.

Figure 3. Skills gap between youth and adults (2023): difference in system performance
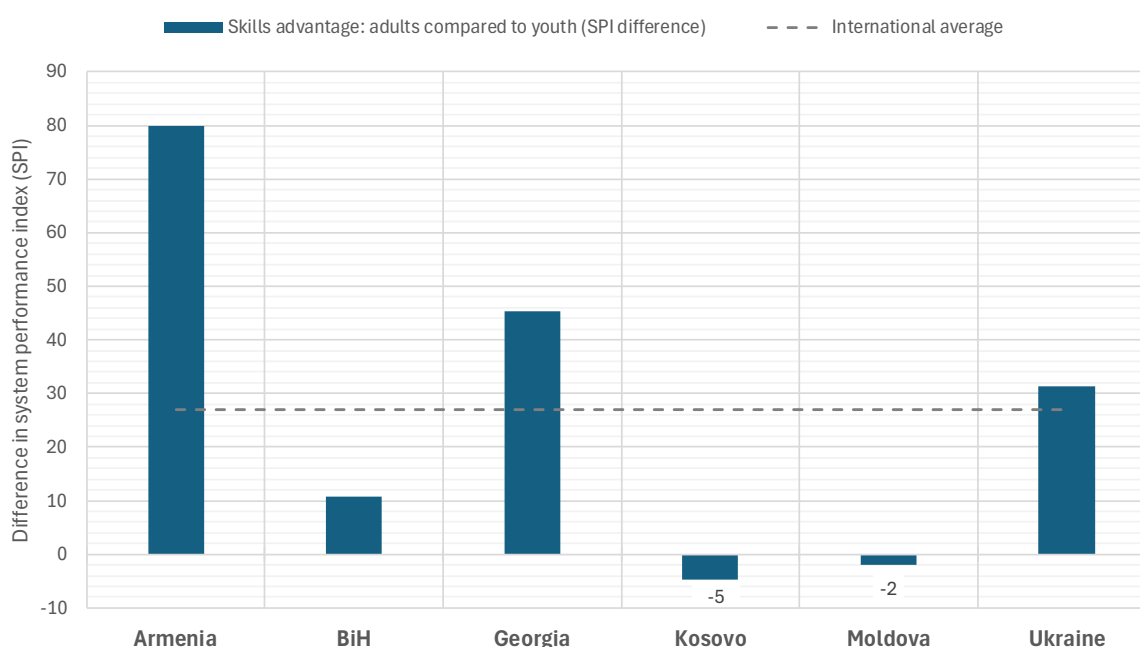
Source: Torino Process database

Note: The "Skills Gap between Youth and Adults (SPI difference)" represents the difference in the System Performance Index (SPI) scores between two key Torino Process monitoring targets (MTs): the skills and competences of youth in VET (MT35) and those of adults (MT39). This measure is calculated by subtracting the SPI score for MT35 (youth) from the SPI score for MT39 (adults). Positive values indicate areas where the skills and competences of adults surpass those of youth, while negative values indicate the opposite.

According to Torino Process data, adults typically possess key competences and skills highly relevant to the labour market, a notable advantage over their younger counterparts. The evidence further reveals that there is no significant gender disparity in the acquisition of basic skills and key competences among adult learners. Such findings are encouraging as they suggest a solid foundation from which to build further educational strategies.

However, these findings change when employer feedback is considered. Businesses across the country consistently report difficulties in finding employees with adequate foreign language, digital, and

IT skills, as well as soft and fundamental social skills. This discrepancy between the skills adult learners have and what employers seek points to a gap in the education and training system's ability to prepare individuals for the current job market demands.

The situation is particularly stark for vulnerable adult groups, such as the long-term unemployed and those who are economically inactive. These individuals tend to have skills and competences that fall short in both quality and relevance compared to the broader adult learning population. This gap directly impacts their ability to secure sustainable employment after training, underlining a critical challenge for policymakers to address with specific support and intervention measures.

This context underscores the pressing need for improvement in the domain of adult education and training programs. It is evident that initial training programs have not sufficiently covered essential skills, making it crucial to explore alternative strategies. Among these, the validation of non-formal and informal learning stands out as a promising approach. Although laws on adult education recognise the value of non-formal knowledge, skills, and competencies, the development of effective models to implement these validations remains a work in progress.

Additionally, the advancement of the Qualification Framework, particularly for credit accumulation and transfer, is essential. This framework could greatly benefit workers, job seekers, and women returning to the workforce, who might possess valuable skills and competencies yet lack formal recognition, thereby enhancing their employment prospects.

Work-based learning emerges as a critical element for the efficacy of vocational education and training (VET) programs. Despite its importance, progress in implementing consistent work-based learning opportunities varies significantly across the nation. Efforts are being intensified to improve the quality and relevance of training, aiming to equip learners more effectively with the skills essential for employment. This effort includes the adoption of external evaluations and fostering closer collaboration with industry partners, thereby strengthening the practical components of VET programs.

Enhancing public and private sector engagement in VET policy development is also crucial. Encouraging greater cooperation and coordination among these stakeholders requires a system that not only incentivises participation through social dialogue but also establishes a regulatory framework. Such a framework should facilitate the institutionalised participation of the private sector and social partners in the governance and operational aspects of VET. Moreover, the development of a comprehensive National Skills Strategy, incorporating the views and expertise of both state and non-state actors, is vital. This strategy should aim to harmonise the efforts of all stakeholders towards the common goal of creating a skilled and adaptable workforce, ready to meet the challenges of today's and tomorrow's labour market.

3. FURTHER READING

For more information on the monitoring results of Bosnia and Herzegovina, see the Torino Process policy and system performance report for 2023 at:

https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/trp-assessment-reports/bosnia-and-herzegovina-2023

For more information on key developments in education, skills and employment in ETF partner countries in 2023, see the cross-country monitoring report at:

https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/education-skills-and-employment-trends-and-developments