



## **DETAILED PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

# **IMPROVING THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC**

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## 1. CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

### 1.1 Context

In recognition of the importance of higher education to improve socio-economic opportunities for young Slovaks, but also for the country itself, the Slovak government aims to move forward with reforms to improve key aspects of its higher education system. The Slovak Republic has achieved rising rates of participation in higher education, and it has introduced important reforms on quality assurance. However, faced with an aging population, a manufacturing economy that is highly exposed to automation and key skills shortages, the Slovak Republic needs a higher education system that is more attractive to its youth, more relevant to labour market needs, and which performs at higher levels of quality in teaching and research.

The Slovak higher education system faces important challenges that limit its ability to sustain the country's economic growth and social well-being. While the Slovak Republic's share of tertiary graduates has been steadily increasing over the past decade, it remains lower than the OECD average (OECD, 2019). At the same time, a large share of young adults pursuing higher education choose to study outside of the country: 17% of Slovak tertiary students study abroad, compared to an OECD average of 2%.

While many factors underpin the choice of young Slovaks to study abroad, including better socio-economic opportunities upon completion of their studies, evidence suggests the Slovak higher education system encounters difficulties in responding effectively to the aspirations of learners and to the needs of the national labour market. As the OECD National Skills Strategy has noted, Slovak higher education graduates have high rates of over-qualification, unemployment rates, and lower earnings premia than is typical of other OECD member countries (OECD, 2019). Recent analyses, including the Value for Money project of the Slovak Ministry of Finance and the *To Dá Rozum* (Learning Makes Sense) project led by the Slovak think-tank, MESA10, have pointed to inefficiencies in public policies and challenges in the governance of higher education institutions that limit their responsiveness and performance.

The Slovak Republic has a largely public university system, with 84% of students enrolled in public universities, 14% in private universities and 2% in state universities. Except for state universities, universities in the Slovak Republic have full autonomy and are responsible for developing the curriculum, collaborating with employers and allocating study places across different programmes (OECD, 2020). Public university governance is distinguished by the dispersion of power to departments and faculties, and weak capacities for strategic leadership. Academic senates typically lack representativeness, due to low participation of students and younger members of staff, which limits the effectiveness of senates to tackle issues of interest to the entire academic communities (Mesa 10, 2019). These characteristics hamper the ability of Slovak universities to support innovation and respond with agility to labour market demands.

There are also important concerns regarding the funding of higher education in the Slovak Republic. The level of investment in higher education institutions is low, as a result of comparatively low per student government funding (OECD, 2019), and the absence of tuition fees. Other challenges exist with respect to accessing European structural funds for research, due to challenges of universities to establish effective partnerships, including with the private sector, to leverage these funds. While the Slovak Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport provides formula-based funding to universities, it has a limited capacity to use funding as an incentive to encourage institutional practices that could help improve the quality and labour market responsiveness of higher education.

The Slovak Republic has taken steps to improve its higher education, also in line with its commitments made in the EU framework. In particular, the country recently introduced important reforms on quality assurance

in higher education, with the development of an external quality assurance process through establishing the Slovak Accreditation Agency, an independent body that became operational in 2020. However, given the breadth and depth of the challenges in higher education and specifically with respect to governance and funding, Slovak authorities have identified the need for a comprehensive reform to complement and enhance the impact of ongoing efforts.

The mission of the Directorate General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM) of the European Commission is to provide support for the preparation and implementation of growth-enhancing administrative and structural reforms by mobilising EU funds and technical expertise. The Slovak Republic has requested support from the European Commission under Regulation (EU) 2017/825 on the establishment of the Structural Reform Support Programme ("SRSP Regulation"). The request has been analysed by the Commission in accordance with the criteria and principles referred to in Article 7(2) of the SRSP Regulation. Following this analysis, the European Commission has agreed to provide support to the Slovak Republic together with the OECD to develop action plan to improve key aspects of the higher education system, such as governance and financing, under the conditions set in the Framework Grant Agreement (hereinafter "the Agreement").

## 1.2 Objectives of the Project

The general objective of this Project is to contribute to institutional, administrative and growth-sustaining structural reforms in the Slovak Republic that, DG REFORM states, are in line with Article 4 of the SRSP Regulation.

The specific objectives of this Project are:

- to support the national authorities in enhancing their capacity to formulate, develop and implement reform policies and strategies and in pursuing an integrated approach ensuring consistency between goals and means across sectors;
- to support the efforts of national authorities to define and implement appropriate processes and methodologies by taking into account good practices of and lessons learned by other countries in addressing similar situations;

DG REFORM states that the above is in line with Article 5 of the SRSP Regulation.

The achievement of the objectives are not solely the responsibility of the OECD and will depend partly, but not only, on the Slovak Republic's action.

## 1.3 Relevance of the Project

The Project will support the Slovak authorities in addressing key challenges in higher education, while complementing reform efforts underway in the area of quality assurance, as outlined in the previous section. The work will build on recent national and international studies, including *To Dá Rozum*, the OECD National Skills Strategy and the European Commission's peer learning exercise on the governance of higher education institutions.

The project will include:

- (1) An analysis of the existing legal, regulatory and institutional framework of higher education in Slovakia, identifying policy options to improve the system's relevance, quality and attractiveness;

- (2) A review of the higher education framework of other comparable EU member states having successfully introduced policies and practices, especially to reform their funding and governance models; and
- (3) An action plan to improve the Slovak higher education system, with a focus on governance and funding.

The project will be conducted in close co-operation with key government partners including the Ministry of Education and the Slovak Accreditation Agency.

#### **1.4 Beneficiary EU Member State institution(s), target groups and other Stakeholders**

The beneficiary EU Member State of the Project is the Slovak Republic.

Target groups include:

- Mid-level to senior civil servants in the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport and other official bodies responsible for policies, regulation and reform of higher education;
- Senior officials of the Slovak Accreditation Agency and similar institutions with responsibility for higher education;
- Representatives of advisory bodies recognised by government, such as councils of presidents, rectors, or others, and other relevant experts as determined by the OECD;
- Representatives of higher education institutions, staff, students, and civil society.

## **2. DESCRIPTION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT**

### **2.1 Impact, Outcomes, Outputs and Activities**

#### ***2.1.1 Impact and Outcomes***

It is expected that the Slovak Republic, having been closely involved in implementation of the Project and consulted at all major stages of the activities to be implemented, endorses the outputs through its internal mechanisms and implements the work contained in the final outputs.

The overall outcome of the project is the strengthened analytical capacity of the Slovak authorities to design and improve such key aspects of the higher education system as funding and governance, as well as to develop, implement and monitor the reform of the higher education system. The expected long-term impact of the project is the strengthened evidence-base for higher education policy making in Slovakia.

This outcome is expected to contribute to achieving the Quality Education goal (#4) of the Sustainable Development Goals by helping Slovak authorities improve key aspects of the higher education system.

Achievement of the outcomes, and contributing to a longer-term impact of this Project, depends to a large extent on the degree of endorsement and implementation of the output by the Slovak Republic and subsequent enforcement, as well as wider policy conditions, which remain outside the responsibility of the

European Commission and the OECD. Such implementation remains the exclusive responsibility of the Slovak Republic.

### 2.1.2 Outputs and Activities

In order to achieve the outcome of the project (*the strengthened analytical capacity of the Slovak authorities to design and improve such key aspects of the higher education system as funding and governance, as well as to develop, implement and monitor the reform of the higher education system*), the OECD shall produce the following output by implementing the activities listed below:

<b>Output:</b> A final report including (i) an analysis of strengths and weaknesses of the Slovak higher education system, (ii) a review of relevant policies and practices related to higher education funding and governance in comparable EU member states (iii) an action plan on improved governance and financing in higher education with clear priorities for action.	
<b>Activity 1.1</b>	Kick-off event
<i>Description</i>	<p>The Slovak authorities and the OECD will organise a two-day kick-off event with the participation of the EC to start the project. The purpose will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agree on detailed project plan</li> <li>• Agree on creation of Steering Group for the project (see activity 1.6)</li> </ul> <p>The activity will result in the development of a detailed project plan and proposed terms of reference for the Steering Group to be endorsed by all Steering Group members.</p>
<b>Activity 1.2</b>	Assessment of the legal, regulatory and institutional framework of higher education in Slovakia built on the results of previous analyses
<i>Description</i>	<p>The OECD team will carry out a desk study of Slovakia’s current higher education system based on previous national and international studies. The analysis will focus on the features of the higher education framework to identify challenges and opportunities for improvement.</p> <p>To undertake this work, the OECD will do a desk study gathering information and data as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review Slovak legislative, regulatory, policy and institutional documents (available in, or translated to, English language). This can include documents describing the role of government in steering and funding higher education; documents that describe the governance mechanisms in place in universities; current quality assurance and accountability mechanisms; any policy assessment or evaluations; information on the role of external stakeholders in the governance and funding of higher education.</li> <li>• Review findings of recent national and international studies relevant to the Slovak higher education system (available in, or translated to, English), This includes the Value for Money project of the Slovak Ministry of Finance, <i>To Dá Rozum</i>, the OECD National Skills Strategy and the European Commission’s Peer Learning exercise.</li> </ul>

	The activity will result in a summary of key features of the Slovak legislative, regulatory and institutional framework, identifying preliminary challenges and opportunities for improvement.
<b>Activity 1.3</b>	Identification of feasible policy options for improving the system's relevance, quality and attractiveness through fact-finding missions to Slovakia and stakeholder workshops
<i>Description</i>	<p>The Slovak project team and OECD will organise two visits to Slovakia, where the EC as Steering Group member will be invited to participate, to conduct fact-finding interviews and focus groups and stakeholder workshops. The purpose will be to identify feasible policy options for improving the system's relevance, quality and attractiveness, with a particular focus on governance and funding policies.</p> <p>Each visit will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fact-finding interviews and focus groups to provide an opportunity for in-depth discussion with different stakeholder groups of both challenges and feasible policy options for improvement of the higher education system, with a focus on governance and funding.</li> <li>• A half-day stakeholder workshop, which aims to bring together a diverse group of stakeholders to provide opportunities for exchange of views and the validation of findings obtained through interviews and focus groups.</li> <li>• A meeting of the OECD team with the Steering Group (see Activity 6) to discuss key insights from the visit.</li> </ul> <p>For each visit, the OECD will propose a list of stakeholders to be invited by Slovak authorities. Slovak authorities will invite stakeholders and secure the venues for the meeting, as well as covering costs for the venue and catering.</p> <p>The activity will result in a summary of challenges and feasible policy options identified by stakeholders during fact-finding missions and stakeholder workshops and endorsed by Steering Committee members.</p>
<b>Activity 1.4</b>	Comparative analysis of policies and practices to improve funding and governance of higher education in other relevant EU Member States;
<i>Description</i>	<p>The OECD team will carry out a desk study of the higher education system, with a particular focus on funding and governance of at least 2 countries considered relevant for Slovakia, due to similar challenges or similar objectives, similar institutional features or demographic, geographic, social or economic features. This could include for instance countries such as Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Ireland, Portugal as agreed in the Steering Committee.</p> <p>To undertake this work, the OECD will do a desk study gathering information and data as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilising OECD data on higher education (Education at A Glance, Benchmarking Higher Education System Performance, work</li> </ul>

	<p>underway in OECD Higher Education Policy Team) to identify key outcomes and features of higher education in the countries identified.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reviewing key policy documents available or translated into English to develop synthetic descriptions of the key policies in place in these countries, with a particular focus on governance and funding.</li> </ul> <p>The activity will result in a summary of key higher education features and policies of the two countries identified, and their potential relevance to the Slovak’s higher education system.</p>
<b>Activity 1.5</b>	Organisation of workshops and peer-learning activities to facilitate sharing of experiences of policy makers and higher education practitioners from selected EU Member States with Slovak stakeholders
<i>Description</i>	<p>The Slovak project team and OECD will organise a visit to Slovakia, where the EC will also be invited to participate as Steering Committee member, to conduct workshops and peer-learning activities to facilitate sharing of experiences of policy makers and higher education practitioners from selected EU Member States with Slovak stakeholders.</p> <p>The visit will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two workshops that will engage stakeholders in discussing the preliminary policy options identified in Activity 2 in a comparative perspective. Each workshop will involve the participation of policy makers or experts from the two countries identified in Activity 3 (“comparable countries”) to present key features of their systems that could offer useful insights to Slovak stakeholders.</li> <li>• A peer-learning webinar where Slovak stakeholders will have an opportunity to hear from representatives of higher education institutions in the two comparable countries, ask them questions about their system, and exchange views about the challenges and opportunities of some of these countries’ system features to the Slovak system</li> <li>• A meeting of the OECD team with the Steering Group (see Activity 6) to discuss key insights from the visit.</li> </ul> <p>The OECD will propose a list of stakeholders to be invited by Slovak authorities. Slovak authorities will invite stakeholders and secure the venues for the meeting, as well as covering costs for the venue and catering. Slovak authorities will also secure video-conferencing facilities for the two webinars.</p> <p>The activity will result in a summary of the insights from the workshop and peer-learning webinars, and of their implications on the preliminary policy options to be endorsed by the Steering Committee.</p>
<b>Activity 1.6</b>	Development of an action plan with a timeline and milestones for Slovak authorities, with practical guidance on how to improve key aspects of higher education including governance and financing;
<i>Description</i>	The OECD team will develop a draft action plan, drawing on the results of the four previous activities, namely the desk-based analysis of the Slovak higher



	<p>education system, the challenges and policy options identified by stakeholders, and the insights from the desk-based comparative analysis as well as the comparative workshops and peer-learning activities.</p> <p>The Slovak project team and OECD will organise a short visit to Slovakia, where the EC as Steering Committee member will be invited, to discuss the draft action plan to ensure key stakeholders have an opportunity to review and comment on the proposed plan.</p> <p>The visit will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A meeting of the OECD team with the Steering Group (see Activity 6) to discuss the draft action plan.</li> <li>• A focus group with key stakeholders to receive comments and feedback on the draft action plan.</li> </ul> <p>The activity will result in a draft action plan to be endorsed by the Steering Committee containing concrete policy options to improve the Slovak’s higher education system, with a particular focus on the governance and funding of the system.</p>
<b>Activity 1.7</b>	Implementation of a process of inter-ministry/agency co-operation and providing a platform for dialogue among key stakeholders in the Slovak Republic to improve the breadth and quality of participatory policy making
<i>Description</i>	<p>Building on the initial meeting between the Slovak’s Institute for Strategies and Analyses, the European Commission and the OECD in January 2020 with key ministry representatives, a Working Group will be created to oversee the project implementation and constitute an inter-ministerial platform for dialogue. The creation of the Group will include the following actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Slovak’s ISA will invite participants in the Working Group</li> <li>• The OECD will propose a Terms of Reference with key activities and milestones for the group to be endorsed by the Steering Committee</li> </ul>
<b>Activity 1.8</b>	Guidance on how to sustain and nurture this structured collaboration among key stakeholders for improved policy design and implementation in higher education.
<i>Description</i>	<p>The OECD team will carry out desk-based analysis to identify options to establish the Steering Group as a formalised inter-ministerial cooperation body to support reform in higher education in Slovakia.</p> <p>To support this work, the OECD will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review international evidence and practices in the area of public governance, by relying on the OECD’s expertise in this area, and in particular in the context of educational governance (relevant projects include: Governing Complex Higher Education Systems, National Skills Strategies, School Resources Review, among others.)</li> <li>• Include the guidance in the action plan to be endorsed by the Steering Committee</li> </ul> <p>In addition, the Slovak authorities and the OECD will organise an event to disseminate the results of the work and sustain the structured collaboration</p>

	<p>developed through the project. Slovak authorities will invite stakeholders for the launch event and secure the venues for the meeting, as well as covering costs for the venue and catering.</p> <p>The activity will result in the development of guidance on the establishment of the Working Group as a formalised inter-ministerial cooperation body to support reform in higher education in Slovakia.</p>
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### 3. LOCATION AND DURATION

#### 3.1 Location

Any physical meeting, presentation and/or conference with the national authorities will take place in the Slovak Republic.

#### 3.2 Indicative timeline for the activities

The operational implementation period of this Project is expected to last 14 months. The operational implementation period is measured from the date that the detailed project description is approved by the Steering Committee.

The schedule of the activities and outputs is set out as indicated in the following table (indicative timeline) assuming continued support and commitment by the Slovak Republic and assuming no delays in establishing meetings with stakeholders, in getting access to relevant policy, legal and regulatory documentation; and in the organisation of relevant workshops and availability of participants for the workshops.

**Table 1: Indicative Timeline (by month from start of the Project)**

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<b>Output 1</b>	0.1	Launch mission	*						
	1.1	Assessment of the legal, regulatory and institutional framework of higher education in Slovakia built on the results of previous analyses		*	*	*	*		
	1.2	Identification of feasible policy options for improving the system's relevance, quality and attractiveness through fact-finding missions to Slovakia and stakeholder workshops						*	
	1.3	Comparative analysis of policies and practices to improve funding and governance of higher education in other relevant EU Member States					*	*	*

1.4	Organisation of workshops and peer-learning activities to facilitate sharing of experiences of policy makers and higher education practitioners from selected EU Member States with Slovak stakeholders												
1.5	Development of an action plan with a timeline and milestones for Slovak authorities, with practical guidance on how to improve key aspects of higher education including governance and financing												
1.6	Implementation of a process of inter-ministry/agency co-operation and providing a platform for dialogue among key stakeholders in the Slovak Republic to improve the breadth and quality of participatory policy making	*						*					
1.7	Guidance on how to sustain and nurture this structured collaboration among key stakeholders for improved policy design and implementation in higher education.												

### 3.3 Language

Meetings and workshops will be conducted in English. The presentations and reports will be provided in English. The Slovak Republic will take care of the translation of all relevant documents necessary for the performance of the Project. The Slovak Republic will also take care of the translation of the final report in case it deems it necessary, subject to a separate agreement between the OECD and the Slovak Republic on the modalities, according to OECD standard terms. The Slovak Republic will also provide interpretation services during meetings/trainings if required.

## 4. ORGANISATIONAL SET-UP

### 4.1 Organisation of the Project

The Project is organised in the following way:

#### 4.1.1 OECD

The Project will be led and co-ordinated by the Lead Analyst of the Project and the Senior Analyst who leads the work on Higher Education Policy. They will work under the guidance of the Head of the Policy Advice and Implementation Division and will be supported by analysts and other staff in the Higher Education Policy project team, who will work on the analysis, authoring of documents and development of other deliverables. More specifically:

- **Project Manager:** An analyst from the Higher Education Policy project team will act as project manager, overseeing the work, monitoring quality and ensuring timeliness. The Project Manager will also be the main contact for the Steering Committee, take on the management tasks, conduct desk research, support Slovak authorities in organising workshops that convene relevant stakeholders, draft or supervise drafting of notes and other Project outputs.
- **Consultant:** A consultant from the Higher Education Policy project team will support the work as needed.
- **Senior and Junior Policy Advisor:** The senior and junior advisors will review and comment on substantive outputs prepared by OECD experts. Their work will aim to ensure quality control and

consistency across the Project, that the Project is on track of meeting pre-defined objectives and that key corporate priorities of the OECD are mainstreamed in its realisation. Both advisors will also be helping to prepare the substantive inputs for possible launches of any project outputs that may involve senior officials.

- **Project Administrative Staff:** The project administrative staff, in co-ordination with the policy analysts, will be responsible for organising the events, the travel and accommodation (if necessary) for OECD staff and invited experts, in accordance with the OECD travel policy. The project administrative staff will also provide assistance in preparing contracts for Intellectual Service Providers and on the formatting of the report.

#### ***4.1.1 Resources to be outsourced***

The OECD will contract help with certain project activities to external experts, such as providing advice, research and drafting, and support to organise and implement certain activities (e.g. stakeholder workshops). The individuals to be contracted could include experts in the field of higher education and local experts with knowledge of the Slovak higher education and broader policy context.

#### ***4.1.2 Resources to be made available by the Slovak Republic***

The Slovak Republic will constitute a Working Group including representatives of ministries and agencies identified by the Slovak Republic as relevant based on advice from the OECD and as endorsed by the Steering Committee. The Slovak Republic will appoint a project team leader who will act as national contact point for the activities and ensure co-ordination with the Steering Committee, with the OECD and with other national stakeholders.

The Slovak Republic will provide all necessary equipment, its experts and any documents, data and information necessary for the implementation of the Project. The Slovak Republic will also provide full support of technical equipment to the OECD, including available rooms for meetings in their premises, internet access, teleconference facilities and organisation of the stakeholder workshops and peer-learning webinars (for which videoconferencing will be required).

### **4.2 Coordination with DG REFORM**

Section 4.4 of Annex I to the Agreement will apply.

## **5. RISKS AND UNCERTAINTIES ABOUT IMPLEMENTATION**

There are a number of risks associated with the implementation of the Project, which the OECD will take steps to identify and mitigate. See Table 2 below for information regarding external risks.

<b>Table 2: External Risk Analysis and Mitigation Efforts</b>	
<b>Risk</b>	<b>Mitigation</b>
<p><i>Lack of effective co-operation by the Slovak Republic or government bodies.</i></p> <p><i>The Slovak Republic and other stakeholders might refuse meetings, provision of expertise or relevant information that is needed to advance in the analysis of policies and the production of recommendations.</i></p>	<p><i>The project has been structured in response to request from the Slovak authorities and closely matching their needs and the country's priorities. The scope of work has been discussed and agreed with the Slovak authorities. These risks are mitigated by government-wide obligations with EU institutions and by close co-operation with the coordinating Ministry, DG REFORM and the OECD.</i></p>
<p><i>Lack of co-operation from the Slovak Republic and the other stakeholders in participating in the workshops.</i></p>	<p><i>The Slovak Republic will take the lead in proposing and selecting the participants in the workshops/trainings, for discussion with the project team at the OECD and with the Steering Committee.</i></p>
<p><i>Delays or otherwise low quality of OECD's contractor(s)'s work.</i></p>	<p><i>The OECD will undertake the selection of the contractor(s) and will also closely monitor the contractor(s)'s work, including by reviewing the outputs to improve their quality as needed.</i></p>
<p><i>Negative perception of recommendations in the Slovak Republic.</i></p> <p><i>The Slovak media, and some segments of the government or parliament or the education sector including academia may be led to oppose recommendations, in part because of opposition from strong interest groups that feed potentially biased information.</i></p>	<p><i>The OECD is committed to ensure understanding and acceptance of the recommendations to the greatest extent possible, while recognizing that there will always be interest groups that will oppose reforms.</i></p> <p><i>In addition to working closely with responsible government bodies, the OECD will work throughout the project to engage stakeholders in the public and private sectors, conducting workshops and seeking the views of businesses and civil society associations</i></p> <p><i>Final recommendations will be presented at a dissemination event. The OECD will communicate its recommendations as project results in a clear and simple summary.</i></p> <p><i>Throughout the project, the OECD will work closely with DG REFORM and the Slovak Republic to achieve consistency of the messages put out to the public including via media.</i></p>

