

Assessment of the current institutional and operational set-up of the Sector Skills Councils (SSC) in Serbia



Research Findings Report – January 2024

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1.0 Introduction

People 1st International, funded by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), was commissioned by the Office for Dual Education and National Qualification Framework to ensure greater effectiveness and private sector participation in the work of the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) of Serbia and to improve available data for SSC evidence-based policymaking. As part of the process a project group was set up with members from the Office for Dual Educations, the Qualifications Agency, EBRD, Project team including national consultants SeCons. The research undertaken has 3 objectives:

- to assess the current institutional and operational set-up of the SSC;
- the provision of recommendations to ensure greater effectiveness and private sector participation; and,
- to support the Office for Dual Education and National Qualification Framework in the piloting of the proposed model through continuous advising and oversight with the SSCs.

The evidence underpinning this report draws on extensive primary research within Serbia. This includes interviews, focus groups and surveys with stakeholders and employers. The report provides an overview and analysis of the research evidence gathered, and is contextualised through discussions with the commissioners, background reviews of relevant material and reviews of other nations sector skills systems . It uses this holistic evidence base as a foundation towards formal recommendations and proposes a framework for applying those recommendations in Phase 2 of the project.

Online surveys were carried out with stakeholders and employers to establish the state of, and views of, SSCs currently in Serbia. It is these responses that support the changes deemed necessary to meet project deliverables. The following highlights the profile of the respondents of these surveys and, in order to capture respondents' views, a summary of the survey findings appears later in the report.

In total:

- A total of 166 responses were received from stakeholders involved in the Serbian SSC system.
- A total of 170 responses were received from employers not involved in the SSC system.
- A further 56 individuals took part in interviews and focus groups.

A detailed breakdown of this participation is available in the methodology section.

1.1 Project background

In June 2021, the Serbian Government adopted a new **Strategy for Education Development in Serbia by 2030**, accompanied with an Action Plan for 2021-2023. The strategy aims to improve the quality and outcomes of education, increase education coverage across all levels, align education with individual and society needs, and enhance the efficiency of educational resources.

The strategy emphasizes monitoring the labor market's qualification requirements and enhancing vocational education through the National Qualifications Framework of Serbia (NQFS). Measures

include improving curriculum relevance, strengthening cooperation between the labor market and education, enhancing work-based learning, developing students' key competencies, and establishing regional training centers.

The NQF Council plays a significant role in planning and developing human resources and improving the alignment of education with labor market requirements. It also oversees the establishment and activity of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), which are crucial for the efficiency of the NQFS. The NQF Council's involvement in quality assurance and referencing education to labor market requirements further ensures the implementation of the NQFS.

The SSCs are responsible for determining the qualifications needed in various sectors, influencing learning plans and ensuring the quality and comparability of qualifications. The SSCs are composed of members from a wide range of organizations, including government bodies, chambers of commerce, professional associations, educational institutions, and employment services.

An analysis of the SSCs in Serbia reveals certain issues. Many permanent members come from government ministries, limiting the SSCs independence. The rules of procedure do not adequately define the tasks of the SSCs, particularly regarding identifying redundant qualifications and in maintaining the currency of qualifications and competencies. Some SSCs are not structured according to the required classification. Decision-making processes for interdisciplinary qualifications lack clarity. SSC members sometimes lack the necessary expertise, and managing large SSCs poses challenges in terms of coverage of the sub sectors, efficiency, and decision-making. The cost of maintaining the SSC system may also be unsustainable without further optimization; the viability of an SSC needs consideration of funding dependency or self-sustaining commercialisation which might better engage with both employers and training providers for the respective in scope qualifications.

In response to these challenges, the Office for Dual Education and National Qualification Framework has been established, along with other government bodies, to improve the management of the SSCs. The Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs has been working on developing the methodological framework for occupational standards, and this has been incorporated into the SSC structure.

The Serbian authorities therefore have sought an external review and evaluation for SSCs and their operations to determine an approach that is in line with evolving policy and institutional frameworks. The assessment, recommendations, and piloting of an SSC aligned with the findings of the surveys are part of this partnership. A recognized key challenge is to encourage and seek sufficient interest and input from the private sector to better inform and support labor market-relevant decisions enabling future skilling.

Project components

1	Research and Analysis
2	Testing of the proposed recommendations to revamp the SSC in the railway sector:
3	Overseeing the LMIS Development:

1.2 Aim

The aim is to ensure greater effectiveness and private sector participation in the work of the SSCs of Serbia and to improve available data for SSC evidence based policymaking.

1.3 Objectives

- Assessment of the current institutional and operational set-up of the SSCs in Serbia and the provision of recommendations to ensure greater effectiveness and private sector participation.
- Support the Office for Dual Education and National Qualification Framework in the piloting of the proposed model through continuous advising and oversight with the SSC in the railway sector.
- Support the Ministry in overseeing the company procured to set up the methodology for a labour market information system that will bring together data from the education system and labour market for the first time in Serbia on a new digitized platform.

1.4 Summary Recommendations

The following recommendations have been developed after considering the evidence gathered through desk research, survey data from both SSC members and employers (who are not SSC members), in addition to in depth focus groups and interviews with SSC members and other key personnel. This evidence is reviewed in detail in the following chapters, where insights are collected into various themes. Those themes are then examined from the perspective of what alterations may be needed to improve the system of SSCs within Serbia, which are then presented as a list of recommendations. A brief summary of those recommendations are listed here below, however please see the full recommendations chapter for further information.

- 1) **Review legal regulations** surrounding SSC activity and **ensure structures/divisions are appropriate.**
- 2) Devise a clear and consistent set of **criteria for selecting SSC members and establishing SSC internal organisation structures.**
- 3) Develop a **Terms of Reference** document to clearly **define the roles and relationships of the organisations monitoring SSC outputs.**

- 4) Develop **guidance documentation** for members that establishes the **intended outputs** of their work - **covering their responsibilities, possible methods, and examples of good practice.**
- 5) Develop an **updated training/induction tool** for new SSC members covering the above.
- 6) Consider remedial actions to **improve the participation of employers/the private sector** within SSC work.
- 7) Develop a **marketing/public relations strategy** to boost the visibility of SSC work among relevant stakeholders and improve participation.
- 8) The final recommendation links to the need for Serbia to try to **utilise the work and learning** that has already been undertaken and experienced globally in the setting up of national SSCs. There are certainly areas of good practice which could be referenced but it is acknowledged that all nations are different and it may be too difficult practically, politically, socially and economically to simply replicate ideas. However, this should not prevent Serbia from investigating where ideas and systems can possibly be adopted.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Desk Research

The research process began with comprehensive desk research to contextualise our approach, inform our development of the qualitative and quantitative research and to support the development of a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) of the current SSC system. This covered the following:

- *Overview and SWOT analysis of:*
 - Economic sectors in Serbia based on the 12 Sector Skills Council (classification):
 - Information and Communication Technologies, Electrical Engineering, Automatics and Electronics.
 - Agriculture, Food Production, Forestry, Fishery and Veterinary Sectors.
 - Other Services.
 - Industrial Development.
 - Education.
 - Business Administration.
 - Health and Social Welfare.
 - Transport and Transportation Services.
 - Trade, Hospitality and Tourism.
 - Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics.
 - Arts and Humanities.
 - Social Sciences, Journalism and Information.
- Review of relevant documentation including the following:
 - Decisions regarding the appointment of Sector Skill Councils members.
 - Laws and regulations including analysing the Strategy for the Development of Education in Serbia by 2030 and its Action plan.
 - Strategies in the sectors of Employment, Youth, Industrial development.
 - Amended Law on NQF.
 - Rulebook on the Methodology for the Qualification Standards Development.
 - Development of an Integrated National Qualifications System Final Report.
 - Rules of Procedure documents on the work of SSCs
 - Submitted initiatives for the development of qualification standards.
 - Report on the work of the Qualifications Agency.
 - Links to list of qualifications classified per SSCs.
 - Material for the NQF Council- recommendations for SSCs.
- In addition, a 'light-touch' review of international materials was consulted to contextualise thinking and consider some of the important aspects that need to be considered in the development of sector skills systems. This review included a focus on a range of countries to capture evidence of what different systems look like and to evidence any strengths in terms of approach. It should be noted that they are not to be classed as 'comparators' as this would be almost impossible to do without dedicating much more time and resource.
- Output: the desk research elements fed into the *Introduction, Background and Learning from Experience* sections of the report, as well as helping to inform the survey design and

interviews/focus groups discussion guide. These research tools were then used to gather evidence as found in the findings chapter.

2.2 Stakeholder Mapping

The approach to mapping stakeholders was as follows:

- Mapping of existing stakeholders alongside the SSC governance model and institutional set-up, including different types of membership (e.g., permanent, representatives of employers, representatives of higher and vocational schools) of the 12 SSCs to gain an overview of current stakeholders involved in SSCs, and identify stakeholders that require further engagement.
- Gap analysis to identify ‘missing stakeholders,’ and opportunities to optimize the inclusion of new stakeholders – missing stakeholders were identified primarily the lack of private sector representation, see findings chapter for further detail.
- Output: this work fed into the finding sections of the report, as well as helped inform the survey distribution list and the target audience for the interviews and focus groups, including SSC members and non-members.

2.3 Quantitative research

The approach to the quantitative aspects of our research was as follows:

- *Online surveys of:*
 - *Stakeholders, including SSC members and other key partners*
 - *Private employers who are or may consider SSC involvement/membership*

Employers	Stakeholders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A total of 170 responses were received • 18 economic sectors were represented in the responses • Over a third of all employers came from manufacturing • HR employees were the most represented job group followed by Directors • In terms of business size, most responses came from small and medium sized enterprises (37%). • Over a quarter of the responses were received from those people representing business employing over 250 staff • Respondents were, for the most part, from long established businesses, with 83% being 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A total of 166 responses were received • 19 sectors were represented in the responses • Vast majority of stakeholders are from <i>Education</i> sector followed by <i>State administration and defence; compulsory social insurance</i> • Nine out of ten respondents are <i>members</i> of the Sector Skills Council • Almost one fifth are from <i>Ministries</i> and a further fifth from <i>professional associations</i> • <i>Four out five</i> respondents are educated to level 7.1 or above • There was a good spread of respondents from across the various sectors. Most

<p>in operation for 11 years or more. Only 2.5% of businesses had been operating for 3 years or less.</p>	<p>representation (over 10% of respondents from each) came from <i>Social Sciences, Journalism and Information; Health and social protection; Industrial development; and Business administration</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Ministries</i> (24.5% of respondents), <i>Trade Unions/Branch Trade Unions</i> (13.6%) and <i>Professional associations/chambers</i> (15.0%) accounted for over half of all nominating agencies
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- *Survey themes included the following to gather stakeholders' views/feedback on:*
 - *General information about survey respondents/their work organisation*
 - *SSC classification and competencies*
 - *SSC membership and structure*
 - *SSC tasks and working methods - decision-making (using data, analysis etc.)*
 - *Opportunities*
 - *Challenges*
 - *Relationship with the NQF Council*
 - *Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms of the work of SSCs, their impact on sectoral and education policy*
 - *SSCs visibility in the education system and outside the education system*
 - *Mechanisms for ensuring social dialogue.*
- *Survey distribution* - the Office for Dual Education and the National Qualifications Agency and EBRD supported with the survey distribution for SSC members and non-members.
- *Survey tools / administration* - use of Survey Monkey software to design and administer both surveys.
- *Analysis* - use of SPSS software to analyse survey results.
- *Outputs* - survey results helped to shape the discussion guide for the focus groups/interviews and provided significance evidence included within the findings chapter of this report.

2.4 Qualitative research

The approach to the qualitative aspects of the research was as follows:

- *Targeted interviews* - information from the surveys helped to define the target 'interview' participants. In preliminary discussions it was agreed this would draw from "groups categorised by member type and sector. it was crucial to ensure diverse participation, combining categories and creating specific groups (such as agencies and ministers, industry , TVET providers), with a strong emphasis on industry representation. Interviews (1-1) were conducted with one or more representatives from the following organisations:

- Association of Employers (2 participants)
- Ministry of Education (4 participants)
- Office for NQF (4 participants)
- School Principals (4 participants)

Initial plans included the provision of 1-1 follow up interviews where information gaps were identified following initial survey/interview engagement, though these follow up interviews were deemed unnecessary following the success of survey and focus group methods.

- *Focus groups* - 5 focus groups were conducted by SeCons. These focus groups each containing aimed to include 8-12 participants. Final participation as follows:
 - Agriculture (6 participants)
 - Business Administration (6 participants)
 - Industrial Development (5 participants)
 - Traffic and Transportation (4 participants)
 - Non-member, non-SSC-engaged employer group (11 participants)

Focus groups invitations - the Office for Dual Education and the National Qualifications Agency supported in agreement of dates for focus groups for both SSC members and non-members.

- *Outputs* - Interim report containing focus groups/interviews analysis, stakeholder map and recommendations was provided. This evidence has been built upon within this report.

Other research considerations

- *Stakeholder Engagement* - This complex project required engagement with a wide and variable range of stakeholders. With the support of the partners we were able to apply in-built contingencies and strategies in order to deliver the outcomes and outputs effectively. The project partners and our in country national partner Secon ensured that our engagement was planned, structured, focused and tailored to participants' needs and requirements.
- *Sampling* - due to the limited timescales of this work and the need to gather information quickly and from targeted respondents, we adopted a combination of purposive and convenience sampling for this work in accordance with the guidance from Serbian partners who also undertook significant work to enable access to research participants and their insights.
- *Equality & Diversity* - As researchers we committed to upholding and promoting principles of fairness, equality, and diversity and applied this to our research and evaluation activities in line with the principles contained within the UK Equality Act (2010).
- *Data Protection / Research Ethics* - We are well versed in applying a strict ethical code in all the work we undertake. We are bound individually by the ethical codes of our organisation and we adopt guidance drawn from the UK Research Authorities e.g. the Social Research Association (of which we hold membership).

Evaluation

As a result of the work undertaken in this project, we are constructing an evaluation framework to monitor and assess the effectiveness of the pilot of the Railway sector. This will focus on both process and outcomes. This is part of Component 2 but we have prepared a draft ready for comment in good time in order to run the evaluation alongside the pilot. As such, whilst we aimed to supply a draft framework for consideration towards the end of December 2023 work has meant this has been delayed until Feb 24.

Reporting

We have provided regular updates linked to our research activity and agreed these as the project progressed. We provided the following as milestone updates:

- Analysis of survey findings with brief accompanying narrative – October 2023
- Analysis of Focus Groups / Interview findings – November 2023

3.0 Current Sector Skills Council Setup

Within the NQF Council document Guidelines for the Work of Sector Skills Councils, the role of SSCs is described thus:

*In accordance with the Law on NOKS, sector councils as bodies based on **social partnership** analyze the existing and determine the necessary qualifications in a certain sector, identify qualifications that need to be **modernized**, identify qualifications that **no longer meet the needs of the sector**, draft a proposal **for qualification standards within the sector**, give an opinion on **expected outcomes of knowledge and skills within the sector**, promote **dialogue** and direct **cooperation** between the world of work and education, **promote opportunities for education, training and employment** within the sector, **identify opportunities for training adults** within the sector, consider the **implications of the national qualifications framework** on qualifications within the sector, **propose lists qualification by levels** and types that can be acquired by recognizing previous learning, etc. Generally speaking, we can say that the most important role of sector councils is to **serve as a platform for cooperation between representatives of education and representatives of the labor market**.*

During scoping, there was significant uncertainty pinning down the precise responsibilities of SSC members and other key stakeholders involved in the SSC system. The particular role and position of employers relative to SSC members, the Office for Dual Education and NQF, the Ministry of Education, the Qualifications Agency, and the Council for NQF was particularly unclear, and it was not known how the concerns or needs of private business were considered within the work of Serbian SSCs.

Pursuant to Article 21, Paragraphs 1 and 2 of the Law on National Qualifications Framework of the Republic of Serbia, Sector Skills Council task were laid out as such:

1. Review the existing and identify any required qualifications in the sector;
2. Identify the qualifications that need to be updated;
3. Identify the qualifications that no longer reflect the sectoral requirements;
4. Make decisions about the draft qualifications standards made within the sector;
5. Provide opinion about expected outcomes of knowledge and skills within the sector;
6. Promote dialogue and direct cooperation between labour market and education;
7. Promote opportunities for education, training and employment within the sector;
8. Identify opportunities for adult learning within the sector;
9. Discuss implications of national qualifications framework within the sector;
10. Propose lists of qualifications per levels and types, that may be acquired by the recognition of prior learning;
11. Perform other activities in accordance with the law on national qualifications framework of the republic of Serbia (Official Gazette)ⁱ.

The Office for Dual Education and NQF, the Ministry of Education, the Qualifications Agency, and the Council for NQF are all relevant government bodies for each SSC. Their competences are defined

within the Law on NQFS, which at the time of the research, was undergoing the Parliamentary procedure for amendment.

At the time of research there was no official methodology for the development of occupational standards. However, a proposed methodology has undergone pilot testing under the SDC's project. The proposals for occupational standards, which were developed based on the draft methodology (<http://kodekssifara.minrzs.gov.rs/standardi-zanimanja/predlozi-standarda-zanimanja>)

In contrast, a methodology for developing qualification standards has been adopted ([Rulebook-on-methodology-for-developing-qualification-standards.docx](#))

4.0 Summary of Surveys

The following summaries draw out the key findings from both the stakeholder survey and the employer survey. These findings were pivotal in:

- Setting a baseline understanding of people's opinions;
- Presenting critical 'weight of evidence';
- Providing individual sector reference points;
- Allowing comparators across the collective range of sectors
- Shaping the themes for the interviews and focus groups;
- Underpinning the recommendations and pilot.

4.1 Employer Survey Summary

Membership

A significant proportion (70%) of employers would be interested becoming a Sector Skills Council member

- The main motivations behind this were:
- In terms of the SSCs which employers would like to become a member of, the most popular were the:
 - Sector council for the education sector
 - Sector council for the sector of information and communication technologies, electrical engineering, automation and electronics
 - Sector council for the trade, hospitality and tourism sector
 - Sector council for the industrial development sector
- Of the types of membership employers would like to engage in, most backing was for *membership for a specific period* (34%), followed by *permanent membership* (29%); and *rotating membership* (19%)

Classifications

- Over 50% of employers felt that the classifications of SSCs in terms of economic sectors was correct.
- Over a third of employers did not know whether or not the classifications were correct.
- One in eight employers felt that some classifications were wrong and examples given included:
 - There was some confusion re: the make-up of the sectors
 - Some employers felt their business would fit into more than one sector
 - Some employers could not see where their business would fit
 - Some employers felt the Sectors were not diverse enough and conversely, others thought they were too diverse
 - There was a requirement for better segmentation of sectors
 - More sector councils were required

- On the question of how members should be selected, there was considerable support for using a mixed approach combining the principle of delegation/nomination of representatives and the principle of public invitation. It was clear that there was very little support for the latter in isolation.
- Almost four in five of all employers felt that the regularity of member meetings should be 1-2 per month.

Constitution / Procedures

- In terms of the constitution of SSCs, the following were the most popular (all receiving nominations from over 50% of all employers):
 - Employers/employers' associations (87.9%)
 - Secondary schools (70.7%)
 - National Employment Service (68.7%)
 - Higher education institutions (61.6%)
 - Line ministries (56.6%)
 - Professional associations / chambers (51.5%)
 - Council for Vocational and Adult Education/Council for Higher Education (50.5%)
- Standardisation in terms of procedures/criteria appears to be quite important (over 70% registering support for this. In terms of what this might look like, the following were most important:
 - Education (e.g. relevance and level of qualification one possesses, formal/informal education and similar)
 - Work experience in the sector (e.g. at least 5 years)
 - General knowledge of qualifications in the sector

Desirable Tasks

- It is clear that employers place high importance of the provision of Labour Market Information – this feeds into the other important ‘skills’ issues that employers feel sector skills councils should cover. Namely developing skills solutions; understanding skills needs; monitoring skills and providing guidance on skills and knowledge
- Identification of which qualifications need updating should be a key responsibility of SSCs according to over three quarters of employers. Other important responsibilities include reviewing and analysing existing qualifications; recommendation of what constitutes prior learning (levels and types); and decisions about qualification standards.
- With respect to policies/frameworks, a significant proportion (over 75%) of employers want SSCs to develop apprenticeship frameworks and work based learning. In addition around 70% want SSCs to be responsible for defining skills standards in relation to frameworks.
- Employers felt that the most important three aspects to ensure sectoral cooperation were, *the involvement of educational institutions* (almost 80% of all employers); *the promotion of sector-focused education, training and employment opportunities* (almost 70%) and *conducting activities to encourage careers in sectors* (almost 60%)

- Employers felt that the main actions that sector councils could take to support training within the sector were *identification of opportunities for adult education and training* (64%); and *recognizing challenges in training and coaching* (61%)
- In the context of accreditation/certification, employers felt that SSCs could best provide support through a range of actions (all receiving robust support). These included *approving requirements within sectors; awarding certificates; accrediting providers; and determining assessment methods for validating skills*.

Incentives and benefits

- Finally, in terms of *incentives and benefits*, employers were specifically looking for the following (all scoring above a 50% response rate):
 - Availability of labour market information
 - Participation of employers in the preparation and implementation of programs for the acquisition of professional qualifications
 - Improving learning through work
 - Bridging the gap between the needs and the supply of skills in the market
 - Improved education and training provision
 - Strengthening the voice and influence of employers

4.2 Stakeholder Survey Summary

Membership

- Respondents felt that there should be a mix of organisations / institutions represented in sector councils (ranging from 61% - 87% affirmation) with the exception of the inclusion of *Accredited Adult Education Providers* (only around a third of respondents)
- In terms of internal structures and representatives of the various agencies, the optimum number for each was set at 2 members.
- One in five of all respondents felt that the existing structure of sectoral councils **does not** enable effective decision-making
- Only around **half of all respondents** felt that the current model of rotation of members of sector was justified
- Over **40% of all respondents** felt that the sector council function would work more efficiently with a smaller number of members, and more support from expert commissions. Over **a quarter were unsure**.
- Almost **two-thirds of respondents** felt that standardised requirements/criteria were needed for the selection of members of sector councils

Classifications

- Over a third of respondents were unsure whether any sector council was missing and / or should be formed
 - Among the survey respondents who believed a SSC/SV was missing; the following were suggested as missing groupings: “SV for Professional, Scientific and Innovative activities in accordance with the Classification of Activities”, “Construction Industry”,

“Culture”, “Energetics and Electrical Engineering as a separate SV”, “Sector Council for Family, Youth and Demography”, “Sector council for the mechanical engineering and metalworking industry sector”, “Sector Council of Crafts”, “Sectoral Council for the State Administration / Administration Sector”.

- One in ten respondents did not think that the classifications of sectoral councils were appropriate for the economic sectors applied.
- Almost one in five of all respondents thought that some sector councils should be divided/separated; over a third were unsure whether they should be divided/separated or merged?
 - The open text data suggested that the majority of the 1 in 5 respondents who thought SSC/SVs should be separated believed some SSC/SV were covering too many areas; that the areas covered were not related to one another – and/or that this would lead to inefficient working.
 - The most frequently mentioned SSC/SV was Industrial development – with 9 of 26 respondents stating different specific activities should be separated out or moved to another SSC/SV (such as “Mechanical engineering” and “manufacturing”), and 3 more offering detailed reasoning.
 - Comparatively few thought any SSC/SVs should be merged, with two (of 5) comments suggesting they should be merged based on activity – arguing unproductive SSC/SVs should be merged with others.

Constitution

- In terms of standardized requirements/criteria, *relevant sector knowledge, experience and qualifications/education* are qualities valued above *sector representation*
- There was very little appetite for nominating/appointing members through the principles of *public invitation* in isolation. An almost equal percentage of respondents (around 50%) thought that nominating/appointing members should be through the *principle of delegation/nomination* or as a combination of this and *public invitation*
- In terms of Sector Council sessions, **four out of every five** respondents had participated in these in the previous month
- **Over 50%** of respondents felt that attending just one session was sufficient for receiving financial compensation

Desirable Tasks

- In terms of carrying out tasks effectively, the most effective centred on *positive impact on qualifications and knowledge and skills*, the least effective centred on the lack of positive impact on *adult education, promoting opportunities and recognition of prior learning*.
- In terms of future consideration of the Sector Council, over three-quarters of respondents felt that there should be a focus on *comprehensive information on the labour market* and the *development of standards*

Challenges

- The following were cited as the greatest challenges for the Sector Council:
 - Representatives representing the positions of the organizations/institutions that proposed them
 - Rules of procedure not specifying the decision-making process
 - Complexity of the management structure of sector councils
 - Sector councils having a less analytical role in proposing qualifications
 - Modernization of existing qualifications.
 - Involvement of members without expertise
 - Insufficient involvement of members in the work of sector councils
 - Too many members in sector councils
 - Absence of criteria for the selection of members of sector councils

5.0 Learning from experience

Alongside the primary research, a ‘light-touch’ review of global approaches to sectoral skills was conducted as part of the wider desk research. Whilst not being a systematic review of literature (which would be a considerable undertaking and require a stand-alone study), this was aimed at supporting the researchers thinking around the inclusion of themes, questions and key considerations; further contextualising findings, shaping recommendations, developing the SWOT analysis and informing the prospective Serbian model. It should also provide confidence in the coverage of this report (its recommendations and the pilot model) in relation to what has been tried previously; what works well; what doesn’t and what might be held as good practice (which will be beneficial in developing and reviewing the Serbian model going forward).

It offers things to consider in establishing and developing a national sector skills approach and touches on the recognition that there is no ideal model (one size does not fit all); that a ‘silo mentality’ should be avoided; that structural issues can vary (as can remits / functions etc.); and that the role of employers is critical to successful skills systems. As such, this section pulls together common features and observations related to the practice of other nations, and whilst it is not prescriptive in any way (this is not a recommendations section), it may help to form ideas and shape thinking in relation to the model.

This part of the desk review draws from a range of sources which cover general commentaries on global sectoral skills and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) systems. However, this should not be treated as a ‘comparator’ analysis (which is almost impossible), instead it offers food for thought, based on some of the common factors that need to be considered in order to make skills systems work - some of which might easily be incorporated in a ‘Serbian model’, and some which might prove difficult to envisage / achieve. It should be noted that in conducting this research, it is apparent that information on sector skills systems is very patchy and often dated (and also becomes quickly out of date) and that an up-to-date review of ‘global sector skills approaches’ is long overdue.

Learning of lessons

The 'learning of lessons' from other nations, is caveated by the fact that no national skills system is the same as another, and that each is shaped by any number of (internal and external) 'actors' and 'factors' both inside and outside the domain of skills, TVET and the world of education and employment. To complicate things further, the terminology used to describe institutions is not constant or consistent (e.g. use of language such as Sector Skills Councils in the UK; Knowledge Centres in the Netherlands; Skills Centres in Belgium); roles and responsibilities of agencies are blurred and / or overlap; structures change relatively quickly; and the remit of sectoral systems can be very different.

This all points to the fact that that it is inherently difficult to try to compare one nation to another; akin to taking separate puzzle pieces from a range of jigsaws, to create one puzzle – the pieces might look the same but making them fit is a challenge, and in most instances, is impossible. Indeed, there are myriad 'puzzle pieces' (shapes and pictures), that might interact, intersect and influence each other. These could be similar across a range of nations, be much different to other nations, or not exist at all in some nations (in that they may be unique to one nation). As such, key influencers in the development of sector skills networks will include (but not be limited to) prevailing national characteristics such as:

- Politics and governance
- The extent of spatial decision making processes - at local, regional, national level etc.
- Departmental responsibilities (in terms of each 'civil service')
- Dominant industries / employers
- The influence of external systems (e.g. EU)
- The maturity of national sector skills systems / networks

What leaps out immediately from any global consideration of national sectoral structures and procedures, is how they all have distinctive approaches to skills / TVET. These approaches are at times similar and dissimilar, and a pictorial image would produce a very complicated Venn Diagram, which overlaps in places but which also contains many differences across nations; which is characterised by countless actors and influences; and which contains independent / dependent parts that range from the easily recognisable across systems, to the unrecognisable idiosyncrasies of individual nations. In short, there are as many things uncommon across national sectoral systems, as there are common, and what looks like good practice / strengths in one nation, might not map over as good practice / strengths in another.

The inherent message is that lessons can be learned, and good practice elsewhere can be considered, but careful analysis is required in order to ensure that what looks good elsewhere might also be a good fit for Serbia. Therefore what emerges is a 'picture of a range of pictures', which reflects the fact, that any study of sector skills is the study of these 'ever-moving' pictures.

One of the key lessons to be learned, is that skills systems are not 'static', they move and change over time (as they should), in relation to ever-changing features such as:

- changing politics / governance;
- industry / economic priorities;
- development of education / qualification systems;
- evaluative reviews of what works and what does not work;
- the needs of employers
- the status of skills shortages; skills gaps and skills mismatches.
- and other influences that are both seen and unseen.

Why a sectoral approach

Almost the first question which needs answering for any nation considering / developing a sectoral approach, centres on 'why is the approach needed.' This widens out in other questions such as 'where does the impetus for the approach originate; what are the barriers and enablers; who is behind it; who is against it; and most importantly what are the objectives? The best 'sectoral' models embed an almost 'project management' approach' to these questions – with clear 'logic models' setting objectives that are conditioned and shaped by agreed inputs and expected outputs, outcomes and impacts. They contain plans around deliverable timelines; build iteratively on experiences; embed constant evaluation; and they learn from 'what works' and just as importantly, what doesn't.

It is instructive to understand why some countries choose a sectoral pathway. The European Training Foundation (ETF), has worked for many years to support partner countries to set up Sector Skills Councils (including Serbia), and it points to the main reasons that some of these countries followed the sectoral route (<https://www.etf.europa.eu>):

- Turkey's system (created under the leadership of the Vocational Qualifications Authority) was developed to use committees to review, recommend and decide on the adoption of qualifications.
- Georgia's mission was to strengthen social partnerships
- Belarus focus was on developing qualification systems
- Ukraine centred on supporting employers' skills in regional labour markets
- Macedonia (through NQF legislation) and Montenegro (partnership-based approach) both embedded the coordination and modernisation of qualification systems within SSCs.

This underlines the fact the starting point for pursuing the option of a sectoral option might be 'why', but the answer is invariably different across nations and this will be no different in relation to Serbia.

No 'one-size' fits all

The no 'one-size' fits all premise should be treated as a 'given' in the development of any sector skills system. It would be almost impossible for any single 'national' system to be replicated in another. There will be similarities between nations but no two nations across the globe have identical systems. This applies not just to the actual skills system but also the constituent parts, the policies underpinning it; the challenges faced by it; the aims and objectives. This does mean that nations can borrow ideas; learn from mistakes and shape a system to fit its own peculiar needs. The Serbian model will no doubt look like other models in places but it shouldn't set out with a premise that it can look exactly like another.

'Differences in skill demand, utilization and productivity levels make a 'one-size-fits-all' skills development policy impossible to implement....Such variance requires complicated interventions and high levels of state capacity in both industrial and skills policy – capabilities which are not always present even in advanced economies... (Jagger *et al*, 2005: 86).

Avoiding a silo mentality

It might appear that placing industries together (e.g. through standard industrial classifications) might be a sectoral 'best fit' scenario, however this can also lead to 'silo-mentalities' and in addition, it could risk neglecting the 'over-lapping' that exists across sectors. For example in the United Kingdom's sector skills system, there are any number of instances where employers do not easily fit into one or other sector. This is particularly the case across the wider public sector, where justice sector and health sector employers could fit into either designated sector skills council (e.g. employers operating in areas such as mental health, substance misuse, emergency services span both health and justice).

Most sectoral systems are very 'silo-focused', which makes them less able to deal with cross-sector issues and labour market adjustments. One of the biggest problems is that some sectors actually draw on the same pools of workers (e.g. technicians and junior engineers)....(Sung, 2010)

Indeed, employers themselves recognise and act on this challenge, as can be seen in the formal and informal collaborations that exist in certain areas such as interoperability (fire, ambulance, police) and social care (health, primary care). Nations need to find ways to incorporate this in their systems

and operational design. In the UK, there are cross-sector forums that exist to combat silos and there is joint working across Sector Skills Councils in areas such as Labour Market Information and the development of apprenticeships etc.

The above points to 'collaboration' being a key driver for 'non-silo' operations but there are many other reasons which owe less to 'strength based' considerations and more to addressing weak points in the system. For example, inactive or low activity sectors which might, following a review, have their activities and responsibilities be moved to more active (or more financially viable) SSCs where needed. E.g. there are many instances of SSCs merging in the UK such as Skills for Health and Skills for Justice.

This acknowledgement of the need to work 'out of silos' and across sectors is typified by organisations that exist to coordinate and collate cross sector information and activity. For example the work of the 'former' Central Organisation of National Training Agencies of Enterprise (COLO), in the Netherlands, where 'extensive cross-sector labour market information and forecasting adds value to the effectiveness of the Knowledge Centres and to the system as a whole' (Sung, 2010: 28). It can also be seen in the UK in the various organisations that have existed to carry out similar activities (Sectors Skills Development Agency, UK Commission for Employment and Skills, Alliance of Sector Skills Councils; Federation for Industry Skills and Standards).

Role of employers

The lesson from the experience of many other nations is that the role of industry sector associations, and employers needs to be maximised to enable confidence in sectoral networks. This is particularly resonant in terms of links to TVET - e.g. employers and industry experts supporting in areas such as developing units of competence, skill sets and qualifications to ensure these have the essential currency and effectiveness to meet employers' current and future projected skills needs. Where sector skills councils are successful, there is always good employer engagement with drivers centred on meeting employers skills agendas. However, engagement needs to be built upon by sector skills councils embedding employers within their structures.

The ETF offers some examples of the established range / models of employer involvement which it describes as *employer owned approaches (in sectors with a high representation of employer organisations)* and *employer-driven (based on the strong leadership of employers and private actors)*. It also cites the approaches of those nations relatively new to the world of Sector Skills Councils:

- 'Employer-involved models' in which public authorities engage employers (and unions) through policy dialogue and legislation - Belarus, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan.
- Employers playing a leading role in initiating the dialogue on national qualifications frameworks - Ukraine and Russia,

It concludes by stating that 'attention should be given to social dialogue, and policy incentives to enhance the role and capacity of social partners at both national and sectoral levels.'

It is clear that where an employer focus works best, there exists a clear relationship between what employers 'give' and what 'employers' get. As such, the best sectoral systems in terms of employers tend to be those that are 'demand driven' as opposed to 'supply driven'. This is because a supply driven focus can constrain an SSCs' effectiveness in relation to things such as qualifications revision, understanding of direct links to sector workforce planning, knowledge of current and future workplace skills needs, and structured targeted and effective workplace assessments. These all place too many demands on educational institutions and training providers alone and require employer input. Conversely, Industry and employers will have little familiarity for the nuances of education, educational structures and it is this symbiotic relationship that SSCs can foster which enables industry and education to work together in ensuring a relevant national skills agenda driven by what employers need.

Consequently, in terms of TVET, the role of industry associations and employers needs to exist and influence at a level that is sufficient to enable confidence in developing units of competence, skill sets and qualifications that have the essential currency and effectiveness to meet employer current and future projected needs. Good sector skills approaches are those that constructively and successfully involve employers (e.g. UK, Australia; Netherlands; Belgium).

UK policy has a strong focus on engaging employers in both the design and delivery of TVET and ensuring the system is "demand led" rather than "supplier driven". This is helping to improve quality and relevance.

British Council, The UK Skills System: An Introduction

Structural considerations

There is much international debate concerning the establishment and operations for Sector Skill Councils which revolves around structure, objective, and effective outcomes. In most countries the debate is centred in central government with the inherent possibilities (through the election process) for change in opinions, structure, and funding related matters. In recognising that skills scenarios and systems change, it should be acknowledged that this does present one of the first challenges to any skills system; the impact that change has on consistency and / or inconsistency of models; the shifting priorities of governments and the fact that initiatives come in and out of fashion.

The following, which draws together some of the characteristics of the governance of national sectoral systems, as captured by the International Labour Organisation (<https://www.ilo.org>), highlights the range of different frameworks that exist:

- **Statutory Authorities:** SSCs are established as statutory bodies with legal authority. These councils operate under specific legislation that outlines their roles, responsibilities, and governance structures.
- **Industry-Led Governance:** SSCs are typically governed by industry representatives, employers, and sometimes employee organizations. The composition of these councils may vary based on the specific industry and the country's legal framework.
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** SSCs operate as a collaborative effort between the government and private sector stakeholders. Public funding and support are provided alongside industry contributions.
- **Licensing and Accreditation:** SSCs have the authority to license or accredit training providers, ensuring quality standards are met within the sector.
- **Regulation of Qualifications and Training:** SSCs are empowered to regulate qualifications, training standards, and certification within their respective industries.

The issue of funding within the structural set up is complicated and one which is treated very differently across nations in relation to both sector skills councils and TVET. One thing that is apparent is that funding and demand appear to go hand in hand. For example, in the UK the original licence to operate as a sector skills council was linked to funding which came through a circuitous route (central government / Department of Business Innovation and Skills / UK Commission for Employment and Skills) and which carried with it, specific deliverables (e.g. provision of Labour Market Information) driven from the centre.

The move away from government funding has seen a reactive move away from this remit to fulfilling the new demand of customers (employers) paying for services. This has seen a shift away from things such as the update and provision of labour market information. On reflection in the UK, a combination of centralised funds, committed to maintaining effective evidence based knowledge allied to funding (both from and influenced by) employers might be the best way forward. As such, the origins, direction and beneficiaries of funding streams need careful consideration in order to successfully negotiate (and satisfy) a range of stakeholders.

What might good look like?

The above snapshot provides much to consider in shaping what 'good' might look like. However, in all probability, 'good' will be an emerging mixture of many things and what it looks like for one nation, it may not look exactly the same for another. It will (should) also be a 'moving feast' which is subject to constant reflection and revision. The ETF has laid out a 'considered' picture of what constitutes 'good practice' in terms of developing a sector skills council approach and it is clear that:

'setting up effective SSCs in partner countries will be a longer term process best developed through learning by doing, with a strong need for capacity building (<https://www.etf.europa.eu>, 2015)

It goes on in the same report to set out what three key areas of focus should be for those nations embarking on or developing SSCs:

1. *Good governance* - which includes:
 - a. Developing and implementing legislative policy frameworks for SSCs
 - b. SSC regulation which involves relevant and competent stakeholders
 - c. Setting-up and managing networks of sectoral and industrial actors;
 - d. SSC funding strategies
 - e. Management of relevant expertise
2. *Employer / employees engagement*:

‘...effective involvement and leadership of employers in skill development is crucial. Thought should be given to how to move towards the most effective, professional and, if possible, employer-led councils, where feasible’.
3. *Creating and using evidence*:

‘decisions made by SSCs should be based on information about education, training, skills, qualifications and/or curricula relevant to the labour market needs of the sector. Qualitative and quantitative data are essential tools. This should translate into policy analysis and advice, as well as policy management’

In summary, what is essential, is knowing what ‘good’ might look like in Serbia and plotting a path to achieving it. There are enough lessons that can be learned in shaping that path; enough evidence to inform direction; and enough examples from other nations to give inspiration. The development of a pilot to test what works and what doesn’t is the first step; independent and objective ongoing evaluation and re-evaluation will be required in order to work towards ‘good’ for Serbia.

6.0 Detailed Primary Research Findings and Discussion

Reflections from the survey findings above are considered here in this chapter the other research evidence. These insights are presented as a SWOT analysis of the current SSC setup within Serbia based on evidence gathered through surveys (stakeholder and employer), interviews (with Association of Employers, Office for NQF, School Principals, and Ministry of Education) and focus groups (with members of SSCs for Agriculture, Business Administration, Industrial Development, and Traffic and Transportation).

Below is a brief summary of the SWOT analysis highlighting the current Strengths and Weaknesses of the SSC system in Serbia, alongside possible Opportunities, and Threats. Together these factors formed key considerations in the development of our recommendations, as well as the model for Phase 2 of the project.

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
<p>Faith in the mission</p> <p>Willingness to seek expert advice</p> <p>QA perceived as supportive</p> <p>Acknowledgement of improvement</p> <p>Survey evidence suggests a majority have high confidence in SSC work</p>	<p>Private industry not engaged/aware of SSC activity</p> <p>Gaps in stakeholder input and expertise</p> <p>Lack of evaluation of activities</p> <p>Engagement differs between SSC members</p> <p>Informal social links to seek expert advice</p> <p>Different areas of expertise place differing burdens on SSC members</p> <p>Avenues to impact on policymaking are unclear</p> <p>SSC membership number/ mode of working causing inefficiency in decision making</p> <p>SSC classifications/ divisions/ structures could be improved</p>	<p>Improve industry outreach</p> <p>Creation of a mechanism to evaluate activities</p> <p>Improve membership selection process</p> <p>Streamlining the onboarding process for new members</p> <p>Renew focus on goals, mission, and outputs</p> <p>Develop a formal mechanism for councils to coordinate and share information</p> <p>Review communication methods</p>	<p>Lack of industry voice may lead to unnoticed issues</p> <p>Lack of regular evaluative activities leading to unnoticed issues</p> <p>Lack of evidence in support of decision making</p> <p>Selection of SSC members important and uncertain</p> <p>Inefficiencies in working leading to long processing times for processing and approval of qualification standards</p> <p>Perception of competition between stakeholders</p> <p>Dissatisfaction among some members regarding their lack of influence</p> <p>Overcommitment of resources to inactive SSCs</p>

	Uncertainty in the role of the Office for NQF		
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In the sections below, evidence from research notes appears in **red**, direct quotes from research participants appear in **blue**.

Strengths

1. **Faith in the mission** – Evidence suggested members perceived their roles as important, with one describing their work within the SSC as a “privilege” citing their responsibility “shaping the future workforce” (Focus Group Transport, Q9). Another framed the plan towards achieving their aims as “ambitious” (Focus Group Business Administration, Q5). The Focus Group for Transport noted a key example in which collaboration between stakeholders through SSCs had solved a key issue in which prospective workers in the transport industry were unable to attain a C category licence to drive heavy vehicles. The involvement of industry voice placed pressure on the Ministry to make the necessary changes.
School Principals recognised that when qualifications have been successfully developed, they are generally positive on the results (Interview data, Q6).
2. **Willing to seek expert advice if needed** - Evidence suggested a strong willingness and ability to seek external expertise when the need arises.

“...if I’m not the expert for certain fields, I’ll always try to consult my colleagues who are the experts for advice.” – Focus Group Agriculture, quote

3. **QA perceived as supportive** – The Agency was seen as having a strong working relationship with SSC members (Focus Group Industrial Development, summary) and supporting “preparation and administrative activities” (Focus Group Agriculture, Q13).

The Agency is perceived as highly significant and supportive in the work of the Council. – Focus Group Agriculture, notes

This sentiment was echoed across other FGs, notably Industrial Development – but was not universal, with some evidence suggesting QA, and NQF (as the overseer of SSCs) may be in competition and that there was jurisdictional tension between the organisations or otherwise a lack of clarity (Interview data, NQF).

4. **Acknowledgement of improvement** – Prior to the establishment of Serbian SSC system, qualifications work was described as highly laborious and time consuming – with no system for the relevant stakeholders to formally collaborate.

“Now we’re all sitting at the same table and can discuss relevant topics.” – Focus Group Industrial Development, quote

5. **Survey evidence suggests a majority have high confidence in SSC work** – 71% of stakeholder survey respondents agreed that the existing structure of SSCs enables effective decision making, with open text highlighting efficient working, high levels of professionalism, and the ability to access expert advice as key reasons for successful activity.

“In principle, the working model involving working groups that prepare proposals and draft decisions for the Sectoral Council to decide has proven effective. The adoption of decisions at the level of the Sectoral Council carries weight, considering that most institutions are represented.” – Survey data, quote

However, detailed comments did also highlight issues such as differential engagement between members, inefficiencies due to the SSC membership amounts, and lack of expert insight on key issues among others – this is explored further below.

Weaknesses

1. **Private industry not engaged/aware of SSC activity** - Representatives of industry (“Private sector”, “representatives of economy”, etc.) are disengaged with the work of Sector Skills Councils and lack a voice within the work (interview data; Survey data; Focus Group Employers; Focus Group Agriculture, Q2).

It was recognised that representatives of economy are missing, specially from the private sector - Focus Group Agriculture, notes

Almost all respondents stated that they have never heard about SSCs or their existence. – Focus Group, Employers, notes

“Employers always look at final result, but when we are talking about SSCs, they don’t see results and potential benefits.” – Interview Employer Association, quote

The social representatives (syndicates and industry) pointed out that there need to be more frequent communication with the employers to understand their needs. – Focus Group Business Admin, notes

This is frequently positioned as a key issue in **all** evidence gathered through the research.

“Decision-making competences of SSC members are often lacking; the participation of representatives of institutions with appropriate competencies is insufficient, and there is a lack of experts who apply the relevant competencies in practice/business.” – Survey Data, quote

Opportunities for promotion of SSC work to improve the participation of the private sector are described as rare and conditional on the personal engagement of members; one Focus Group with employers highlighted how few were aware of SSCs – even those involved in dual education (Focus Group, Employers). Meanwhile another Focus Group highlighted employer’s associations may be unaware of SSC activity/existence (Union of Employers of Vojvodina mentioned specifically) (Focus Group Agriculture, Q20). It became clear from 1 to 1 interviews that Employer Associations were involved in some SSC activity, but not consistently across all SSCs. This spoke to a clear need to widen the scope of engagement and pursue greater promotion of SSC work among the relevant stakeholders in industry, which was acknowledged by some SSC members.

“[In our mandate] one of the obligations/jurisdictions is related to promotion, however no one has ever explained to us what that means, and how we should do that.” – Focus Group Agriculture, quote

The expectations and approach to skills needs differ given the different evaluative criteria adopted by the different types of organisations - public companies focus predominantly on employee competency, whereas private companies focus on employer performance.

Unsurprisingly, employer survey data suggested that employers believed they should be more involved in the work of SSCs, with 90% of employers stating that employers or employer’s associations should be considered for SSC membership.

Members representing the schools consider that they are most at risk due to decisions made by this SSC (Business Admin), again pointing to the example of losing one educational profile in their high schools. Participants pointed out that there is a vacuum between theory and how it effects practice. – Focus Group Business Admin, notes

They propose that there needs to be a lot more thought given on the impact of the SSC recommendations on the industry and education before decisions are made. - Focus Group Business Admin, notes

These observations were widely reported in open text responses in survey data.

2. **Gaps in stakeholder input on decisions** – All Focus Groups suggested that there were other gaps in consideration when making decisions beyond a lack of private sector involvement. This is expected given different involvement of the private sector in different areas of economy – the key stakeholders differ between SSCs. Business Administration Focus Group participants, for example pointed out that the public sector is the biggest employer in their area, and so the focus changes lack of private sector input is not framed as such a significant issue. Transportation Focus Group participants said participation was a key worry, especially in meetings. Gathering all 25 members was a logistical challenge.

(...) people who were involved in writing the recommendations for changing standards could not participate at the meeting where those changes are discussed and “some other people were in charge of the decision making” – Focus Group Transportation, notes

Notably, participants of the Transport Focus Group additionally highlighted that the concerns and input of students/youth, as the future workforce, were underrepresented within SSC decision making. However, it was troublingly stated that “Union of Employers or Youth Associations is not interested in being involved in social dialogue” (Transport Focus Group, Q22). This appears to contradict with focus group evidence wherein all participants saw the value of SSC work and expressed a desire to be involved - and survey evidence, which highlighted 70% of employers wished to participate through membership, and 90% were keen to be heard on issues affecting their sector.

3. **Potential gaps in expertise and evidence** – It was highlighted in some evidence that different SSCs may have a wider variety of suitable expertise than others, and that there are gaps in needed knowledge.

They perceive a problem within their SSC where professions extend beyond the transport sector (e.g., mechanical engineering, education). This poses a challenge during decision-making processes as non-professional members also cast votes. – Focus Group Transportation, notes

This sentiment was echoed in other focus groups and also in interview data.

The issue is in the diversity of profiles and qualifications under the umbrella of administration. – Focus Group Business Admin, notes

(...) any person can propose an initiative; however, besides those from the education system, no one would know how to fulfil the complicated requirements. – Interview data, School Principals, notes

Additionally, the issue was further emphasised by reflections from other FGs that sometimes standards may be adopted, or decisions made without discussion – either due to a lack of expertise on hand, or an inability of the required members to attend meetings (Focus Group Transport, Q5). It is possible the dominance of members with an education background, and barriers to communication resulting from the lack of familiarity with education terminology may be emphasising this issue (Interview data NQF).

The Focus Group for Industrial Development highlighted that for 2 recent initiatives, there had been no primary information collected to support the work (Focus Group Industrial Development, Q7). It was highlighted in the same group that the SSC for ICT had been working on an analysis of the ICT field in education – indicating that pockets of research do occur, but these are ad hoc with no systemic requirement to support initiatives with new evidence. Despite this, there is recognition among SSC members of the value of new research, and a desire to undertake future research in partnership with the QA and partners from businesses/ private sector.

“Analysis took a lot of time but it was very helpful to have an overview of the current state of ICT in education so you can decide on future initiatives.” – Focus Group Industrial Development, quote

However, there was concomitant acknowledgement that the SSC members did not have previous experience conducting this type of analysis, indicating a potential skills gap to achieve this aim (Focus Group Industrial Development, Q7a).

4. **Lack of evaluation of activities** – A majority of, if not all SSCs, made it clear there was no formal feedback or evaluation of their work outside yearly reporting (Focus Group Agriculture, Q18; Business Admin, Q18), and no review of initiatives after implementation “within the school system” (Focus Group Agriculture, Q4).

Participants mentioned they don't have KPIs established but they think that feedback from enrolment rates in some schools would be a good KPI for the work of an SSC.. – Focus Group Industrial Development, notes

An overwhelming majority of stakeholders across all research methods agreed improvement in this area was crucial.

5. **Engagement differs between SSC members** – Evidence across all survey data and FGs suggested large differences in the engagement of some members in SSC work compared to others.

Many aspects are left to the personal capacities of individuals, and the question is how well each person has adapted and how motivated they are. - Focus Group Agriculture, notes

This was consistently framed as a key issue for the efficiency and effectiveness of SSC work. There seemed to be a correlation between the overall number of SSC members and the number of inactive members - as survey respondents and Focus Group participants (Industrial Dev, Q2) tended towards discussing these two aspects together.

This Council is very big, with 30 members and covers 7 areas of industry, plus there are so many non-active members. – Focus Group Industrial Development, notes

In the same FG, it was stated that there was no written working arrangement describing the responsibilities of different members in SSC work – clarifying that participation is organised around the arrangement with QA and compensation for participation in SSC activities.

6. **Informal social links to seek expert advice** - Following up on Strength 2, seeking expert help when the need arises is based on “informal channels of communication” and the social links of members. While this can be a good resource, it can also be unreliable, as the quality and

volume of expert advice become conditional on the particular social links of the council members.

"...if we are discussing some initiatives and we see that we are lacking some expertise or other opinion, each of us, through our personal connections tries to find that person or company representative." – Focus Group Agriculture, quote

7. **Different areas of expertise place differing burdens on SSC members** – It was highlighted that some SSC members are far more engaged in the work than others, and that significant burden falls on specific members (Education colleagues highlighted as a key example) as their expertise is inherently more applicable to the development of initiatives, qualifications, and standards. The burden of administration, communication, and consultation involved in developing initiatives was also unevenly distributed along the lines who has expertise and who does not (Focus Group Industrial Development, Q11; Focus Group, Agriculture, Q11; Transport Q6).

" Some individuals exert more influence... These individuals come from the profession. " – Focus Group Transportation, quote

Focus Group data (Business Admin) highlighted that there was a perception that despite having equal voting rights, SSC members do not have equal expertise in the professional areas that the SSC oversees. This can lead to unnecessary disagreements, conflict, and inefficient working. In the survey/Focus Group evidence for Industrial Development it was also highlighted that despite necessary extra commitment of time and resources from some members (above and beyond their normal working responsibilities), this additional input would not be compensated, except by personal satisfaction in performing high quality work.

"I have dedicated extensive after-hours time analysing and communicating with various organisations and institutions to gather valuable information about initiatives." – Focus Group Industrial Development, quote

8. **Avenues to impact on policymaking are unclear** – No formal mechanism to feedback work of SSCs into policymaking efforts results in a lack of understanding of how SSC work may impact on policy development in education and industry.

Members lack awareness of how they can contribute to policy development due to the incomplete nature of the cycle. Focus Group Agriculture, notes

Participants in the Focus Group for Transport suggested that presentation of SSC work at events and conferences could improve visibility across a range of stakeholders, potentially fostering a potential avenue towards policy impact (Q21).

The need for this was highlighted in the Employer Focus Group, as participants raised a key issue in the dual education approach that fundamentally needs to be addressed through education policymaking, rather than through any activity of the SSCs themselves.

All participants stated they have major issues with the lack of labour force, not because there isn't an education course or qualification, but because there are no students enrolled in those courses. – Employer Focus Group, notes

While SSCs are conceptually positioned to fulfil the role of a bridge between employers and government, the absence of a clear avenue to influence policy indicates that this function of SSCs need development. This is crucial to foster the necessary information channels that would allow government to respond to the most pressing issues facing the Serbian workforce.

9. **Mode of working causing inefficiency in decision making** – Survey data and at least one Focus Group (Business Admin) indicated that the mode of meeting and discussion of minor issues for long periods of time was leading to vast amounts of time commitment on unimportant issues, stressing the limited capacity of members to engage meaningfully in SSC activity.

"I'm bothered by the inefficiency... If we were to sit down informally, we'd make quicker decisions." – Focus Group Business Admin, quote

It was also highlighted that majority voting often leads to non-expert voices overshadowing expert voices in decision-making (Focus Group Business Admin). It was suggested consensus voting be adopted, all considerations entertained in decision making, and attempts to find compromise be placed at the forefront of decision making. While this may lead to greater inefficiency, it was also expected to improve the quality of initiatives and reduce wasted work.

Some members pointed out that they invested a lot of personal time and energy researching and finding arguments to keep a qualification only to lose the vote. –

Focus Group Business Admin, notes

In interviews it was suggested that a single member had responsibility for communicating with QA and that the inflexibility in that channel of communication was difficult due to a personal lack of understanding of some issues that QA was asking about.

“(QA) does not anticipate a response from any other individual within the Association. In essence, if they send me an email, I am the sole expected respondent, and no one else.” – Interview evidence, Association of Employers

This may imply a greater need to be reflexive and open up channels of communication more broadly or allow for greater flexibility in procedure when the need arises.

10. **Uncertainty in the role of the Office for NQF** – Potentially part of the wider issue of low visibility of SSC work, but members of at least two councils (Agriculture, Industrial Development) did not clearly understand the role of the Office for NQF.

It is important to emphasize that members don't recognize work of Office for NQF, they are not familiar with their role and responsibilities. - Focus Group

Agriculture, notes

In the Focus Group for Industrial Development, it was explained that there was no communication between SSC members and the NQF Council, with all comms going through QA (Q16).

“Visibility is our handicap because we feel like our work is not visible at all.” –

Focus Group Industrial Development, quote

The Business Admin Focus Group agreed that communication with the Agency was smooth and clear, but that the agency could take a more active and firmly defined role in cooperating with SSC members.

However, the Focus Group for Transport highlighted the yearly training offered by the NQF and the involvement of NQF experts when more knowledge was needed on a particular issue. This indicates the involvement of the NQF is inconsistent across SSCs, but where it is known it is appreciated and valued.

11. **SSC classifications/divisions/structures could be improved** – Interview, Focus Group, and survey data suggested disagreement and uncertainty regarding whether the classifications of different SSCs were fit for purpose.

A main issue participants mentioned is that divisions of sector skills Council are not in correlation with division of the areas of work. – Focus Group Industrial Development, notes

Open text survey data picked out the SSC for **Industrial Development** as a potential sector which needs to be split apart or have its responsibilities re-allocated - nine comments (of 26 total comments) simply stated “Sector Council for the Industrial Development Sector” without further context, or with a short comment such as “Too big”, “Too complex”, “Too bulky” or “Too crowded”. Several more comments went in significantly further detail on how they believed the SSC for Industrial Development should be adjusted – see full survey data for details.

These conclusions were backed up by focus group and interview evidence, where it was acknowledged that despite some inefficiencies in decision making, it would be hard to adjust the process due the activity of the SSC covering 7 different areas of industrial development with limited areas of overlap. This has led to expertise bottlenecks where only particular members have the necessary knowledge and professional experience to make key decisions on particular initiatives.

Participants feel that it’s going to be difficult to re-organise decision making process since areas of work are not aligned with the SSC. In other words, you will not always have people from their field of expertise deciding on a particular interest. – Focus Group Industrial Development, notes

“[Industrial Development] has a lot of members and covers a lot of different qualifications. That is difficult to manage and follow.” – Interview data Employer Associations, quote

This notably also featured heavily in the interview with School Principals, as one of their delegates was a member of the SSC for Industrial Development, they had an extensive understanding of the issue and suggested similar revisions to structure and responsibility.

“The council would be more operationally effective if it were entirely specialized. For instance, in the field of transportation, there are automotive mechanical technicians whose expertise is more aligned with mechanics rather than transportation. It is problematic if they participate in decision-making for transportation issues.” – Interview data, School Principals, quote

This was further supported by employer survey data, as over a third of employers did not know whether or not the classifications were correct, and one in eight employers felt that some classifications were wrong. Examples were provided stating that the sectors areas were unclear; that they did not understand where their business would fit (which SSC would be responsible for their activities); or that the number or distribution was incorrect (both too many SSCs, and too few).

Overall, employers were less convinced that SSC classifications/sectors of responsibility were correct (50%, vs. 70% among stakeholders.)

It was highlighted within the Focus Group for Industrial development that the SSC areas of responsibility/sectoral divisions were established in accordance with the European Qualification Framework – however, noted that areas of work within Serbia are not well aligned with the EQF.

One participant mentioned areas of work concerning metals and non-metals, which are within SSCs, subdivided into more than three segments. - Focus Group Industrial Development, notes

“(…) All matters related to the automotive industry, such as servicing, are within the SSC for transport. However, individuals with such profiles are not typically associated with transport and traffic schools. Therefore, when schools delegate a person to the SSC, that individual may not address initiatives related to the automotive industry.” - Focus Group Industrial Development, quote

“Even though we have more than 30 members we still lack some expertise and we cannot decide about some initiatives because we don’t have a member who is the expert in that field.” - Focus Group Industrial Development, quote

Themed working groups were highlighted as partial solution but ran into severe limitations when specific areas did not sufficient membership numbers. For example, despite having 30

members, the machinery working group within the SSC for Industrial Development has 3 members (Focus Group Industrial Development, summary).

12. **SSC membership numbers may be leading to inefficient working** – At least three focus groups (Business Admin; Industrial Development; Transport) indicated that the number of members was leading to inefficient working. With 24 members, Business Admin participants explained that:

Members do not know each other well enough, and therefore human resources (in terms of expertise of SCC members) are not used at full capacity. - Focus Group Business admin, notes

They do not know all the members, who are qualified or where they come from (from which community/institutions) - Focus Group Business admin, notes

themes were discussed in the industrial development focus group with 30 members.

“It is way easier to function when you have a smaller group of people who are focused on the same topic.” - Focus Group Industrial Development, quote (referencing the member’s dual SSC membership and experience on the smaller SSC for ICT)

It was further highlighted in the Focus Group for Transportation that a high number of members makes scheduling of meetings significantly more difficult and can lead to problems in decision making if a significant number of members are unable to attend important votes (Focus Group Transport, Q3).

13. **Survey data additionally highlighted the following key challenges:**

- Representatives representing the positions of the organizations/institutions that proposed them
- Rules of procedure not specifying the decision-making process
- Complexity of the management structure of sector councils
- Sector councils having a less analytical role in proposing qualifications
- Absence of criteria for the selection of members of sector councils

These issues point to a higher level structural issue with the organisation of SSC work, which was largely unexplored in evidence with FG participants, as members of specific sector councils lacked the scope to see issues across different pockets of work.

Opportunities

1. **Improve industry outreach** – Considering Weaknesses 1 and 2, efforts to formally engage the private sector, industry, and business in the work of SSCs should be undertaken to improve the applicability of SSC outputs to the true conditions of industry activity. Having an accurate and up-to-date understanding of industry challenges is essential to SSC work in order to aid the legitimacy, applicability and effectiveness of standards and qualifications. Fostering clear channels and systems of communication is essential to developing the necessary understanding. This could involve including industry voices as members of SSCs, or as suggested in one Focus Group (Agriculture), fostering a specific database of external sources to call upon for research, consultation, and analysis.

Regardless of which approach best meets the aims of this work, it should be considered essential that work is done to raise awareness among employers regarding the existence and function of SSCs and to foster new lines of communication between key stakeholders.

“I have been on so many conferences on different topics and never ever have heard about SSC.” – Focus Group Employers, quote

As highlighted by employers, one such communication channel may be the Chamber of Commerce (Employer Focus Group). However, measures must be taken to ensure that the Chamber of Commerce understands that within this relationship it is acting as a liaison between SSCs and employers, given that when SSCs were established, the Chamber sent their own employees as delegates indicating a lack of clear understanding of what was required of their position (Interview evidence, NQF, Q5).

One Focus Group participant (Business Admin) recognised that they had the necessary skills and expertise on hand to be able to work on improving communication with industry (as a journalist), however thus far, there had been no appetite to leverage that expertise in that particular direction among other members.

Other solutions to this problem have been suggested in Focus Group and survey data:

- The possibility to directly invite and involve professional employer’s associations as permanent or temporary members in SSCs.
- Approach engagement on a more regional basis and decentralise SSC activity outside Belgrade (emphasised by Focus Group for Transport).
- Prepare a special promotion plan or PR campaign focusing on the work and goals of the SSC, as well as examples of good practice to raise awareness and highlight the mission.

Stakeholder survey data also agreed a wide variety of membership was desirable including from private sector businesses – with 2 members from each agency/structure/organisation type being the optimal constitution agreed by a majority of respondents. Notably, representatives from education disagreed, emphasising that their expertise in drafting qualifications necessarily required more input from themselves and their colleagues within the education sphere (Interview data, School Principals) – while also emphasising the importance of involving employers and the private sector.

Meanwhile, employer survey data suggested a significant portion of employers (70%) had interest in SSC membership, suggesting that engagement of industry in SSC activity is possible and the limitation may be in communication and outreach, rather than disinterest from the private sector. The Employer Focus Group supported this notion.

all the participants see the positive value of the SSC and could see the benefit of the SSC in helping them find employees, working with them on marketing and visibility and putting them in better contact with the education system. Focus Group – Employers

This is encouraging, as it indicates outreach work has a strong mandate and the visibility issue can be addressed – however, it should be considered that while employers express a strong desire to participate, they are on aggregate unfamiliar with SSC working and were largely basing their expectations on the information provided to them about SSC working within the session’s introductory presentation. It is necessary to reaffirm, marketing and outreach would play a key role in securing the buy-in of private sector stakeholders as close collaborators. As one participant phrased it:

“(...) marketing is crucial, you need to sell us story about SSCs.” – Focus Group Employers, quote

2. **Creation of a mechanism to evaluate activities** - Considering the lack of an evaluative mechanism to formally feedback success and challenges in implementation (Weakness 2) – there may be an opportunity to conduct evaluative activities and seek iterative improvement through regular feedback on skills initiatives, qualifications, and other activities within the next SSC cycle.

“If we had feedback, maybe that way we could find out what should be done better and how is that qualification in practice going.” - Focus Group Agriculture, quote

“Also, feedback information would be useful as promotion material.” - Focus Group Agriculture, quote

3. **Improve membership selection process** – Stakeholder survey data suggested possible improvements to membership selection– however it is important to state, stakeholders were divided on key questions of membership - including appointments; member numbers; and compensation. Some respondents believed certain sectors needed expanding, however a majority of open text responses argued in favour of reducing the number of members and ensuring each member has a specific reason for their inclusion, such as their professional expertise.

“There should be a smaller number of members. Some members do not appear at the sessions and/or have never taken an active part in the work of the SC.” – Survey data, quote

Focus Group data also supported the argument that some SSCs have too many members, with the Focus Group for Business Admin highlighting with 24 members, there is a lack of familiarity between members, and therefore an inability to utilise key skills and expertise among members. The role of the Agency as a coordinator was raised as extremely important (Business Admin, Q2).

These responses were associated heavily with the need to ensure expertise among decision makers:

One participant (journalist) even pointed out that she considers herself a misfit in this particular SSC and would have preferred to be in another SSC where she could contribute more. But she was delegated by the Chamber and that was that. – Focus Group Business Admin, notes

Similar themes were explored in the Focus Group for Industrial Development, quoting their struggle with 30 members (Q2). It was highlighted that membership selection should be

adjusted to account for expertise so that members can contribute to the work of SSC with informed viewpoints.

“Often happens that we have some lawyer or person employed in HR instead of those who are experts in that particular field” – Focus Group Industrial Development, quote

Some evidence suggested it may be best to leave the membership selection process unchanged, while filling knowledge gaps with a series of expert commissions on an ad hoc basis. Expertise and experience were consistently framed as a more important selection criteria than education level.

industry in the positions of administration can work and someone with a high school diploma and not exclusively someone with a completed secondary vocational (legal-biotechnical or economic) school. – Focus Group Business Admin, notes

If representatives of Employers were to be involved as members of the SSCs or as liaison to SSCs, the Employers believed it was appropriate to have a range of individuals involved – as HR sometimes have an exclusively administrative role, it may be necessary to have other roles speak for issues closer to the nature of business activity (Focus Group Employers, Q10).

4. **Streamlining the onboarding process for new members** – Evidence highlighted the possibility of improving the experience for new SSC members through targeted training to induct new members into the aims and methods of the SSC. For example, in one interview, it was discovered at least one stakeholder lacked a clear understanding of the purpose and function of the SSC, despite being a member.

This opportunity aligns well with the NQF aim to produce an online toolkit to educate members on “basic terminology and obligations” (Interview evidence, NQF Q8), but there may be deeper opportunities within this induction process.

Focus Group notes (Agriculture) suggested the following would be worthwhile inclusion to an induction programme “information on what is expected from the council, the

responsibilities of its members, an overview of the relevant stakeholders and their roles and responsibilities, a presentation of a successful initiative as an example, and the effects it had.” This effort was expected to reduce acclimatisation time and enable members to get engaged with SSC more quickly. Similar sentiments were echoed by the Business Administration FG, and the Industrial Development Focus Group – where it was added that some elements of the induction that they had undertaken may be unnecessary to their current work (such as the history and development of the NQF), arguing that current work and state of the NQF was of greater importance (Focus Group Industrial Development, Q9).

5. **Renew focus on goals, mission, and outputs** – In terms of future aims of the SSC, over three-quarters of stakeholder survey respondents felt that there should be a focus on *comprehensive information on the labour market* and the *development of standards*. Evidence from the Employer Focus Group supported this notion, highlighting the key challenges among industry involve gathering labour market information, and the modernisation of standards - particularly to account for the skills to operate new technology that are greatly needed within private sector work, but are currently absent in education.

“Persons that we employ are educated only in the public postal service and not in the private sector. Private sector requires knowledge of new technologies and digitalization of delivery services.” - Focus Group Employers, quote

Employer survey data agreed that providing Labour Market Information was the most important function of SSCs for their activity. Other desired key functions included updating qualifications; developing apprenticeship frameworks; and helping businesses to identify training, development, and accreditation opportunities.

The Focus Group with employers however reaffirmed that the “most important function that the SSC is in the involvement in the educational politics and profiles” while aiming to make sure needed profiles have sufficient popularity with students to meet the needs of the labour market.

Participants have agreed that there is a big distance between the quality of education and the needs companies have. Knowledge is wide but not deep (e.g. they saw that people don't have basics skill that relevant for some job). – Focus Group Employers, notes

“Now, we have to employ someone and then teach him how to do a job that he is educated for.” - Focus Group Employers, quote

Within the Focus Group for Industrial Development, it was highlighted that the SSC wished to pursue greater involvement in the development of educational enrolment policies and should examine enrolment data in order to do so.

“We should discuss about enrolment policies that are crucial for future development of educational system. We should have some analysis about enrolment in secondary schools so we can decide which profiles should be improved and which should be cancelled.” – Focus Group Industrial Development, quote

Further Focus Group data also suggested the need for a clear mission statement as both a promotional tool and organising principle to rally engagement and participation in SSC activity (Focus Group Business Admin and Agriculture). The need for labour market and educational analysis was also oft highlighted alongside promotion of SSC work across all stakeholders (Focus Group Industrial Development, Q26).

Notably, the SSC for Transport was the only SSC who felt positive about their existing Labour Market Information work, noting that despite some aspects being “done informally”, that they did a “good job collecting data” from “industry and data from NES, as well as other sources” (Focus Group for Transport, Q7.) It was unclear how this Labour Market Information was utilising within the work of the SSC.

Lastly, it should be considered that representatives from education placed significant importance on the development of qualifications – but did not recognise any other function of SSCs, such as the gathering of labour market information (Interview evidence, School Principals). Despite offering lengthy suggestions on how to reorganise the work of SSCs, their suggestions for how SSCs should be organized were biased towards the fulfilment of this single objective (qualifications).

6. **Develop a formal mechanism for councils to coordinate and share information** – Across all evidence, it was recognised that significant overlaps exist within the sectors of each SSC, and therefore some issues, skills, or competencies benefit from the input and expertise of multiple SSCs.

Sometimes, knowledge and opinions are scattered across other councils. For example, when dealing with certain competencies, it would be beneficial to have

*the opinions of members who are involved in engineering or a related field. –
Focus Group Agriculture, notes*

This was highlighted prominently in the Focus Group for Industrial development, where one member happened to be both a member of the SSC for Industrial Development and the SSC for ICT. This member highlighted that understanding the work of both SSCs was an asset and there should be greater efforts to familiarise SSCs with the work of their companion organisations in different sectors of economy. It was highlighted that this type of work was ongoing and popular, but sporadic.

“When we have multidisciplinary initiative, and we assess that we are not competent enough to decide with about that initiative we always seek for support from other SSC.” – Focus Group Industrial Development, quote

7. **Review communication methods** – In particular SSCs where meetings were described as challenging due to the logistical difficulty of meeting in person, online meetings can be considered as an alternative, providing measures are in place to enable and encourage effective collaboration and efficient decision making. Even in situations where a physical meeting is taking place to vote on key issues, distance voting could be considered to ensure the participation of key members and that all voices are heard. This may need to be considered alongside a review of the management structures around SSC working.

Threats

1. **Lack of industry voice may lead to unnoticed issues** - Pursuant to Weakness 1, inadequate or out of date skills profiles may go unnoticed without strong industry participation in SSC activities.

There has been no initiative from the business sector to introduce a new qualification. – Focus Group Agriculture, notes

Without business input into qualification design, there may be a lack of understanding of skills needs and requirements, and this may go unaddressed.

Alternatively, different challenges may face employers that go unnoticed by SSCs. As a possible example, in the Employer Focus Group it was highlighted that across all sectors of

participation the key issue was in enrolment numbers and a lack of participation among specific areas of work, rather than in skills profiles.

Few participants that are involved in dual education system stated that because of lack of students they cannot fulfil workplaces allocated for dual education. – Focus Group Employers, notes

“Maybe we won’t be part of dual education, because there are not enough students to fulfil that workplaces.” – Focus Group Employers, quote

Despite this, one SSC Focus Group (Business Admin) indicated that the industry/economy does not know the meaning of “good” skills profile for their particular area/classification.

For administrative positions, individuals with a high school diploma may also be considered, not only those with a diploma from a legal, bureaucratic or economic school. – Focus Group Business Admin, notes

The Focus Group for Transport reaffirmed the need for strong Labour Market Information (alongside cooperating with NES) in addressing this issue, as it is key to understand how school graduates go on to participate in the labour market in order to assess whether standards and skills profiles are accurate and up to date (Focus Group Transport, Q17). This evidence reaffirms the need for two way communication between SSCs and industry: SSCs to output information, skills, and recommendations to industry – meanwhile, industry needs a voice within the work of SSCs in order for key issues to be seen and addressed in the development of qualifications.

Encouragingly, all evidence suggests that if awareness of SSC work was higher among employers, then participation in SSC activity would follow.

“Believe me if you say to some of us that participation will help us in future to solve some of the current issues that every employer will be willing to participate and allocate their time.” – Focus Group Employers, quote

Employers in the Focus Group also expressed their desire to participate was not conditional on monetary compensation, if the benefits were as claimed within the session.

- 2. Lack of regular evaluative activities leading to unnoticed issues** – It was highlighted recurrently that without feedback from KPIs, data, or evaluation activities there is no way to examine if an initiative has been effective. Without feedback following the implementation of initiatives, issues may be undetected and remedial action never considered.

“We can have five training sessions, but five training sessions attended by five people is a bad indicator.” – Focus Group Transportation, quote

- 3. Lack of evidence in support of decision making** – Key gaps in expertise due to continued lack of private sector voice in SSC work and a lack of mechanisms to gather primary data to inform initiatives and qualifications development. In the Business Admin Focus Group participants explained their efforts to collect primary research data as partly insufficient, adding:

Mostly people do not respond to their surveys or do not know how to fill them out. – Focus Group Business Admin, notes

- 4. Selection of SSC members important and uncertain** – Pursuant to Weakness 12, too many members hamper efficient decision making, too few results in a lack of necessary expertise. The continued dominance of SSC members with an education background may continue to problematize decision making and reduce efficiency, although it was suggested in interview evidence that having more members with an education background would better enable the drafting of qualifications – as these members have the necessary skills and expertise. It was noted that this would only be effective if there is enough industry input to represent the needs of the labour market within qualifications.
- 5. Inefficiencies in working leading to long processing times for processing and approval of qualification standards** – While not entirely subject to SSC working, inefficiencies will contribute to longer wait times for standards to take effect within education, reducing the responsiveness of the Serbian labour market.
- 6. Perception of competition between stakeholders** – Some evidence NQF and QA perceived competition between their organisations leading to barrier to cooperation.

“It is often difficult to harmonize roles of all actor. In most of the cases actors are not willing to cooperate with each other.” – Interview NQF, quote

- 7. Dissatisfaction among some members regarding their lack of influence** – Within evidence, the Ministry of Education appeared frustrated with their lack of influence over the drafting of qualifications, emphasising that no one consults them and that they are surprised to see the resulting standards.

Ministry should have more prominent role in work of SSC. It needs to be consulted for each initiative and inform on time, not at the end of the process when is too late for any interventions. – Interview evidence, Ministry of Education, notes

It was somewhat clear that there is a lack of communication and understanding between some stakeholders as representatives from the Ministry did not have a good understanding of the role of the Office for NQF and the QA and did not (or could not) differentiate the two. Despite this, the suggestions of the Ministry of Education did frequently align well with the vast majority of other stakeholders; they emphasised the need for a revision of membership criteria and voting mechanisms; the need for monitoring and evaluation; to organise meetings more frequently, and to promote good practice. They also emphasised that the Ministry could “provide significant analysis for future planning of standards or profiles” towards these aims.

- 1. Overcommitment of resources to inactive SSCs** – The distribution of evidence from different SSCs implies differences in the level of work between SSCs reflected in their engagement within research activities. It is clear that some SSCs are worthwhile and necessary and would benefit from greater resource investment, management, and training. Industrial development has stood out as a key SSC in need of revision, but also a key SSC with great potential benefit to employers and the relationship between education and labour. Despite all SSCs being featured in the stakeholder survey, some SSCs have scarcely featured in written evidence, implying a lack of engagement.

7.0 Recommendations

This section contains key findings and observations based upon the survey and feedback from all individuals and groups. It draws upon experience and knowledge of both international VET and SSC activities and their roles in supporting national skills and workforce capability demands.

1.0 Review legal regulations surrounding the functioning of SSCs to:

- a) Clearly define a competency-based approach to national vocational training, that supports and accounts for the needs of industry (links with recommendation 6).
- b) Structurally reallocate how sectors are divided between each SSC (industrial development highlighted as SSC of most concern). Embrace cross sector solutions where there maybe overlap, this should not be a clash of interests. The QA management of the NQF body to work with SSC ensure minimising excessive duplication of competencies and quaifications where overlap exists. i.e. Share units as common
- c) Pinpoint inactive or low activity SSCs and evaluate the reasons for their comparatively lower activity, strengthen them to meet respective needs, or review and if necessary, move responsibilities to more active SSCs where needed.

2.0 Devise clear and consistent criteria for selecting SSC members. Key considerations include:

- a) Consider requirements for adequate number of members.
- b) Determine essential minimum levels of professional experience or subject matter expertise relevant to the remit of the SSC establishment of personnel.
- c) Support levels to ensure capacity and/or motivation to participate in the required SSC related work.

3.0 Work with colleagues from relevant partner organisations to publish a Terms of Reference to determine:

- a) the aims of SSCs.
- b) the intended mechanism to achieve those aims, including workflow and outputs.
- c) the intended mechanism to monitor and evaluate this activity.
- d) the management structure and precise roles and responsibilities of different organisations involved in the management of SSCs; this may involve an organisation flowchart.
- e) the terminology/glossary required to understand the above points.

4.0 Pursuant to recommendation 3 – develop a guidance document for SSC members covering the responsibilities of their council (with examples of good practice), such as:

- a) drafting of new standards and qualifications, review and updating existing standards and qualifications.
- b) gathering labour market information, conducting environmental scans, participating in evaluation.
- a) c) assessing skills and training (skills needs within economy, and training availability across the education sector);
- b) d) Policy that determines how to collaborate with other SSCs in the performance of the above (especially relevant when drafting standards pertaining to competencies which are common across sectors).

5.0 Develop an updated training tool for induction of new SSC members covering contents - such as described in the Terms of Reference suggested in Recommendation 3 and guidance suggested in Recommendation 4. This should cover:

- a) expected responsibilities of each individual SSC member.
- b) intended working patterns, timelines, outputs, etc.
- c) previous examples of good practice.
- d) how to solicit external (and particularly industry) expertise when required.
- e) Understanding qualifications, competency-based training, and assessments.

6.0 Consider one or more remedial actions to involve greater input from employers and the private sector within the work of SSCs so that practical issues regarding standards development can be considered and addressed. This could mean:

- a) Selecting employers, employer associations, regulatory bodies (OHS, Env) and/or unions to participate as members of SSC's.
- b) Targeted consultation or primary research with employers, employer associations, regulatory bodies (OHS, Env) and/or unions (would require frequent activity to ensure employer's views are adequately considered within the work of SSCs).
- c) Drafting documentation and conducting research on how language is used in businesses (e.g. Job roles and required needs) compared to purely education (e.g. Standards and competencies) to facilitate the input of stakeholders unfamiliar with key SSC format (devising competencies and assessments) and terminology.
- d) Support of training and upskilling via apprentices and the like.
- e) Hold Annual conferences for sector showcasing best practices etc.

7.0 Following recommendation 6, develop a marketing or public relations strategy focused on raising awareness of SSCs and their work – focused especially on key stakeholders absent from current decision making (employers, employer associations, unions, and other representatives with oversight of sectors of the economy – particularly the private sector.) This strategy should identify and capitalise on available channels of communication – such as sharing work at conferences, leveraging the position of the Chamber of Commerce, and interfacing with employer associations.

8.0 Conclusion

The above recommendations are to be carried forward and used in the development of a model for change, presented in a separate document as a guidance tool. This tool provides the methodology required to respond to the recommendations to ensure greater effectiveness and private sector participation. This will support the Office for Dual Education and National Qualification Framework in the piloting of this revised model through continuous advising and oversight with the Sectoral Council for Traffic and Transport.
