

Slovakia: school optimisation – streamlining or mere consolidation?

Slovakia has faced a significant population decline with the number of births dropping to less than half, from over 100 000 in the 1970s to just 48 627 in 2023. This has led to many schools with unused capacity. Currently, Slovakia has fewer than 300 students on average per secondary school. The general government debt, which stood at 56% of GDP with a budget deficit of 4.89% in 2023, required austerity measures, including changes to the school network. On 4 June 2024, the education ministry announced an agreement with stakeholders on a new policy for school optimisation, which will predominantly affect VET schools.

Benefits of school optimisation

- Fiscal responsibility: the fiscal challenges and increased energy costs justify the drive for efficiency. Larger schools with modern equipment could offer a better learning environment.
- Teaching quality: a declining number of professionals willing to teach can be more easily managed in larger schools. These schools reduce the risk of lessons being taught by teachers who are not fully qualified in the respective subjects.

Challenges in achieving effective school optimisation

- Labour market alignment: while the optimisation policy intends to align education with labour market needs better, effectiveness is affected by existing gaps. The Act on VET requires self-governing regions to develop education strategies, but assessments indicate that these strategies are not sufficiently linked to labour market needs. This is partly due to a lack of sub-national labour market intelligence data and the absence of smart specialisation strategies within the national economy.
- Regional disparities: administrative regions in Slovakia do not always correspond to natural labour markets. For example, the Trnava region, shaped like a banana (see Figure 1) is closely integrated with the labour market of the capital city region, and its residents often commute to neighbouring regions as well.

Figure 1: Map of self-governing regions of Slovakia



Source: [Wikipedia](#).

Planning for the new school network

On 3 July 2024, the education minister and other stakeholders met with regional educational authorities to discuss the preparation of regional projects aimed at optimisation. Aiming to lead to a new school network effective from September 2025, the submission deadline for these projects was August 2024. In light of declining national and regional budgets, regional authorities proposed merging schools, including of the creation of secondary schools that offer general education and VET programmes under one roof. While clustering of schools and partial rationalisation can be implemented swiftly, optimisation efforts must be carefully considered.

Areas for improvement

To align VET schools with labour market needs better, all stakeholders should collaborate in three key areas:

- economic strategy: the ministry of economy could strengthen the national economic model by identifying and promoting sectors with high potential, especially those that align with smart economic specialisation. This would provide clearer guidance for aligning education and training efforts with future opportunities;
- quality assurance: establishing a comprehensive national quality assurance strategy would support schools in implementing effective measures. The education ministry can play a key role in driving this initiative;
- employer collaboration: employer representatives, sectoral councils, and the Alliance of Sectoral Councils can enhance their collaboration by conducting detailed surveys of employer needs and adopting international best practices in anticipating future skills. This would help ensure that education and training programmes are closely aligned with the requirements of a rapidly changing job market. ReferNet Slovakia informed a round table of stakeholders about Cedefop's achievements in this area.

Read more

[Press release of education ministry on optimisation policy](#)

[Press conference of national stakeholders on optimisation policy](#)