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Second Chance in Vocational Education and Training of Adults in Slovakia: Second or Wasted Chance?

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Abstract

Context: The paper focuses on an analysis of school-based vocational education and training (VET) of adults in Slovakia against the background of the concept of second-chance education (hereafter SCE). The concept of SCE involves different conditions of education to those that adults faced during their initial education and were unable to meet. Adults primarily study part-time, where they are offered a mirror image of a reduced full-time programme rather than an alternative space for obtaining a degree.

Approach: Several theoretical research methods were used in the paper. An analysis of available statistical data about adults in VET, secondary analysis of relevant literature, the authors' own findings from previous research, and a comparison of selected characteristics of VET of adults in Slovakia with the principles of second chance education allowed for the formulation of synthesised findings and recommendations on necessary changes in adult education in vocational education and training.

Findings: The absence of SCE principles in the vocational education and training of adults in Slovakia is one of the reasons for insufficient participation of low-educated adults. Neither schools, nor the state or municipalities, nor employment offices have created a mechanism for acquiring and keeping adults in education. VET of adults does not fulfil a social integration function because it is mostly used by adults who are upgrading or supplementing their

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existing qualifications. A significant manifestation of the lack of interest in improving the situation of the low-educated in VET is, among other things, the absence of training programmes that would prepare teachers for a non-mainstream educational process with non-mainstream pupils. The measures, which would be aimed at increasing the participation of the low-educated adults in secondary education are absent. This situation results, among other things, in persistent regional disparities in adult participation in education, which deepen the marginalisation of entire regions and their populations.

Conclusion: The VET of adults in Slovakia lacks the concept of second-chance education that would enable those who needed it the most to enter and obtain higher level of education. The implementation of the elements of the SCE concept in VET would allow for an increase in the participation and success of the most vulnerable groups of adults with the lowest education and socio-economic status.

Keywords: VET, Vocational Education and Training, Vocational Education and Training of Adults, Low-Educated Adults, Second-Chance Education, Participation in VET of Adults

1 Introduction

The system of vocational education and training in Slovakia is also available to those who, for various reasons, did not enter it during the initial cycle of education, or who left it prematurely. Even though the law in Slovakia does not explicitly state that VET takes place exclusively at secondary vocational schools, increasing the level of education, together with a vocational qualification, is merely possible within the network of secondary vocational schools. School study programmes leading to obtaining a degree (e.g., The International Standard Classification of Education [ISCED] 5A, 5B) are not considered part of further education (Kočanová, 2007) and there is no specific term naming the segment of VET of adults who study at secondary vocational schools. Adults can study at secondary schools in either full-time or part-time form. For understandable reasons, they usually study part-time, in the form of evening, remote, or distance learning (*Act No. 245/2008 Coll., § 54 on education and training*).

In Slovakia, only 1.1% of adults aged 25 – 64 are involved in formal education (be it vocational or general), compared to the EU27 average of 3.3% (Eurostat, 2022). The reason may lie in the relatively high proportion of the Slovak adult population with upper secondary education, together with the inadequate recognised need for lifelong learning¹. Of this group, adults with the lowest level of education (ISCED 0-2) participate the least in education. This is

¹ Lifelong learning is not recognized as a priority of education policy, which is manifested as insufficient support for adult education on the part of the state (e.g., more than five-year postponement of the amendment of the Act on lifelong learning, lack of institutional coverage of the adult education segment at the Ministry of Education, absent transparent financial instruments supporting adult education, etc.).

a Europe-wide problem, as The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) estimates showed, according to which some 128 million adults in the EU-28, Iceland, and Norway are educated to a low level or have poor digital skills, underdeveloped cognitive skills, or are medium-high educated at risk of skill loss and obsolescence (CEDEFOP, 2020a). Increasing the participation of adults in education is a long-term priority of the European Commission (European Commission, 2009), as many low-skilled jobs are disappearing due to the rapid pace of automation and digitalisation, which may further widen inequalities between adults with different levels of education (Arntz et al., 2016).

One of the specific features of the qualification structure of adults in Slovakia is the territorial concentration of population groups with low level of education and high rate of unemployment in certain regions and communities (such as marginalised Romani communities). This presents secondary vocational schools in Slovakia with specific challenges to which they have not yet adequately responded. The concept of second-chance education aimed at the most vulnerable groups of the adult population, which could have the potential to meet the individual needs of low-educated adults as well as the needs of the regional labour market, is not well established in Slovakia. The present analysis points to a lack of application of the principles of second-chance education in VET of adults, which ultimately disadvantages the participation in VET of those with the lowest level of education. The study recommends that the key elements of the secondary education system should be introduced so that they become a permanent part of adult education in secondary schools, with particular emphasis on their professional and systematic application in relation to adults with the lowest levels of education.

2 Second Chance in Vocational Education and Training

Second-chance education is a concept aimed at providing an alternative path to education within mainstream education. In 1989, Inbar and Sever (1989) proposed three basic criteria that are characteristic of "true" second-chance schools:

- Accessibility for all;
- Effectiveness for increasing already achieved education;
- Providing the same/similar opportunities for success to those offered by conventional education.

SCE opens up opportunities that facilitate social inclusion and equality, prepares individuals for the next level or type of education, increases levels of knowledge and skills, and positively

influences the educational outcomes of future generations (Keogh, 2009), not just young adults but adults of any age. From this perspective, SCE should be seen as part of lifelong learning, as a human right and a pathway to employment, health and political participation that must be accessible to all people throughout their lives (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women [UN WOMEN], 2021a). Several research studies have shown that many students who had dropped out of higher education have the academic potential to successfully complete their education if they are offered appropriate educational alternatives (e.g., Biemans et al., 2020; Franklin et al., 2007; Franklin & Streeter, 1995; Kiprianos & Mpourgos, 2022; Martins et al., 2020).

The role of second-chance schools is not to compete with existing education systems (Kollwelter, 1998). Rather, it is supposed to be an education system aimed at specific groups of young people and adults, which uses specific education methods and primarily monitors the inclusion of vulnerable groups in the labour market by increasing their level of education (Davies et al., 2011).

In Slovakia, there is a lack of research that would shed light on the practice of formal education of adults within VET. Few resources are available to draw on for information regarding the various characteristics of adult learners reflected in their education at secondary schools, about how the teaching process, teachers' interaction with adults, etc. (e.g., Kešelová et al., 2016; Lukáčová & Lukáč, 2022; Lukáčová & Temiaková, 2020; Pirohová et al., 2019; Rigová et al., 2021; Šuťáková et al., 2022). There are a number of interesting studies abroad on the situation of adult learners in VET. Karmel and Woods (2004) conducted a study focusing on second chance in VET in Australia and their findings suggest that the VET sector as the 'second chance' sector is fully justified. Up to 41% of all VET students were second chance learners, and between 10 and 30% of adults eligible for a second chance in education had obtained a certificate or higher qualification in VET. In EU countries, adult participation in VET is still below expected levels, with European adults most often citing a lack of need to learn as the reason for non-participation, according to CEDEFOP findings (2020b). In response to the rising rate of early leaving from VET, CEDEFOP (2016) proposed 11 groups of measures, where second chance VET programmes are considered as an important tool in the group of compensatory measures. The limitations of VET in responding to the specific characteristics of adult learners, particularly disadvantaged learners, are highlighted by Barnett and Spoehr (2008) and Savelsberg et al. (2017). Savelsberg et al. (2017) recommend the introduction of inclusive measures inherent in second chance schools into VET of adults in this context. VET provision for adults should include appropriate practices to address the complex needs of learners, a personalised approach to learning; collaborative working relationships within the VET sector and across other relevant sectors, a system of ongoing support for individuals, flexibility of programmes as well as financial support and professional development for VET staff (Barnett & Spoehr, 2008; Mesquita & Hardalova, 2021).

Second-chance schools have diverse characteristics as do their students and the countries/regions in which they operate (Looker & Thiessen, 2008). They are characterised by heterogeneity; still, adopting the idea of offering a second chance creates a conceptual framework with the typical characteristics of their diverse activities. These include *committed partnership with local authorities* (offices, social service providers, self-government, non-profit organisations, employers, etc.). Second-chance schools have been faced with a difficult task since their started their activity. They have to convince and negotiate with the actors they need to cooperate with if education is to be a real second chance that actually changes the lives of adults (Kiprianos & Mpourgos, 2022). Education alone is not enough if it is not connected with other processes such as outreach and recruitment, financing, providing help with establishing oneself in the labour market, etc.

Another feature is *teaching and counselling focused on the individual*. Applying a "student-centred approach" means designing a curriculum with regard to the social and cultural specifics and individual interests of the learners. "Prior to the course beginning, there is always a needs diagnosis, which puts the learner at the centre of the learning process" (European Association for the Education of Adults [EAEA], 2019). When planning education, the aspirations of adults and the differences between them are taken into consideration, while the emphasis is also placed on recognising the capacity of students to take part in the decision-making process on their learning as well as the potential of intrinsic motivation to learn. This naturally leads to another typical feature of SCE, i.e. *flexible learning programmes* which enable the development of both general and professional skills, and practical training with employers, as well as different paces of advancement in education (Te Riele, 2014). The curriculum in SCE is flexible, designed in accordance with each second chance schools learners profile (EAEA, 2019).

A *supportive teacher-student relationship* is considered a key factor in student success, especially in SCE (Meo & Tarabini, 2020). It is essential for the formation of a supportive environment that minimises negative experiences of previous education. The main aim is to remove obstacles that adults face during education – both in the education process and in everyday life. Schools should play a more important role in the prevention of early school leaving by focusing their counselling activities on at-risk groups of students. At the same time, it is necessary to try and make it possible for early school leavers to return to education as soon as possible (Polidano et al., 2012). In the context of SCE specifics, teachers-training for education in second-chance schools is important. Their *professional development* should focus on developing appropriate skills in behaviour management, learning paradigms, and assessment methods that take into account the diverse learning styles of the learners (Kiprianos & Mpourgos, 2022; Ross & Gray, 2005).

SCE should be designed in such a way as to create the possibility of choosing another educational path. Many learners, just like those who are outside the education system, do

not suit the traditional way of education for various reasons (Martins et al., 2020). As will be shown later in the present paper, it is these basic characteristics of SCE that are absent in the vocational education of low-skilled adults in Slovakia, or they are only represented scarcely and unsystematically.

3 The VET on Offer for Adults in Slovakia in Numbers and Context

VET of adults in Slovakia is carried out in full accordance with pedagogical principles, takes place in a school environment (with the exception of prison education) and is carried out by teachers who have not been trained in any way for the education of adults. At the same time, there are other factors that surpass schooling which also play an important role in the learning process of adult learners, e.g., unemployment, family factors, balancing work and study responsibilities, previous predominantly negative experiences with initial formal education, individual learning competences, etc. A specific group of adults are those who return to school to obtain their first qualification and, thus, enter a system which should be purposefully built as a subsystem of SCE. Slovak legislation, however, does not recognise this concept, and the term "non-traditional student/learner" has not yet taken root in Slovakia, either.

To fulfil the objective of this study, authors asked the Centre for Scientific and Technical Information SR (CVTI SR) for up-to-date statistical data on adult students in secondary schools. We worked with them according to predetermined criteria in order to get as accurate an overview as possible of the situation of adults in secondary schools. With regard to the above, the available data were analysed based on the following:

- The authors worked with data on part-time study, as adult learners are mostly part-time learners. In 2020, the part-time study was provided by almost 43% of secondary schools in Slovakia (CVTI SR, 2021).
- The present analysis draws from data acquired on September 15th, 2020², while only those schools were considered that had adults over 18 years of age studying part time in:
 - Lower secondary vocational education (two-year study programme without a vocational certificate - ISCED 254);
 - Upper secondary vocational education (three-year study programme with a vocational certificate - ISCED 353);

² In Slovakia, educational institutions are obliged to report data to the all-Slovak statistical survey by September 15th of every year.

- Upper secondary vocational education (four- or five-year study programme with a school-leaving certificate - ISCED 354, 454).
- Although the study focuses mainly on those who want to acquire their first vocational qualification, to highlight existing inequalities in the use of second chances in education, authors also present data on the largest group of adults in secondary education who already have a qualification and are upgrading or retraining for a second chance, for comparison;
- In most cases, increasing the adults level of education takes place in a linear way – if they have completed lower secondary education (primary school), they usually enter upper secondary vocational education (ISCED 353) leading to Certificate of Apprenticeship. Adults who have not completed lower secondary education can only enter the so-called F programmes (ISCED 254 without vocational certificate). Acquiring full secondary vocational education and obtaining a school-leaving certificate (ISCED 354 or 454 respectively) is usually preceded by obtaining a Certificate of Apprenticeship.

After the selection of criteria, further work with the data using secondary analysis of professional sources from Slovakia and studies from abroad was conducted. Data analysis together with theoretical backgrounds allowed us not only to create a description of the distribution of the adult population in secondary schools in Slovakia (regional specifics and types of study) but also to analyse them in relation to the principles of SCE, to point out problematic points in the provision of second chances to educationally disadvantaged groups of adults and to propose the necessary solutions aimed at increasing their participation in secondary education.

3.1 Selected Data on Adults in VET in Slovakia - Regional Specifics and Type of Study

Adults were represented in all types of VET in Slovak vocational secondary schools in 2020/2021. The highest number (4,452) of adults aged 18+ were studying at secondary vocational schools in *post-secondary non-tertiary education*³. This means that adults most often enter vocational education and training with the aim of gaining additional qualifications to those they have already acquired in initial vocational education and training. Most frequently, they are motivated by changes in their own careers, the need to deepen existing qualification, or acquire a new one in response to changes in the labour market. Indeed, post-secondary non-tertiary education offers a wide range of courses and programmes that

³ The post-secondary, non-tertiary sector covers courses of education which follow the acquisition of a general education qualification or vocational qualification at upper secondary level.

are usually shorter in duration compared to tertiary education and may be seen as a way for adults to further their education and skills or change careers. *Two-year and three-year programmes* were the second most frequently visited type of vocational education at secondary schools in the part-time form (2,362 adult learners). This is the group of adults who are the focus of this study and should be the focus of educational policy, since in Slovakia they are a relatively homogeneous group in terms of their ethnicity and low social status, and often concentrated in socially excluded communities. How many of them are returning to school in order to obtain their first qualification, is not possible to find out from data retrieved. The fewest adults attended programmes leading to *complete secondary vocational education* (four or five year programmes completed with a school-leaving exam) in total, 1,163 students aged 18 and over.

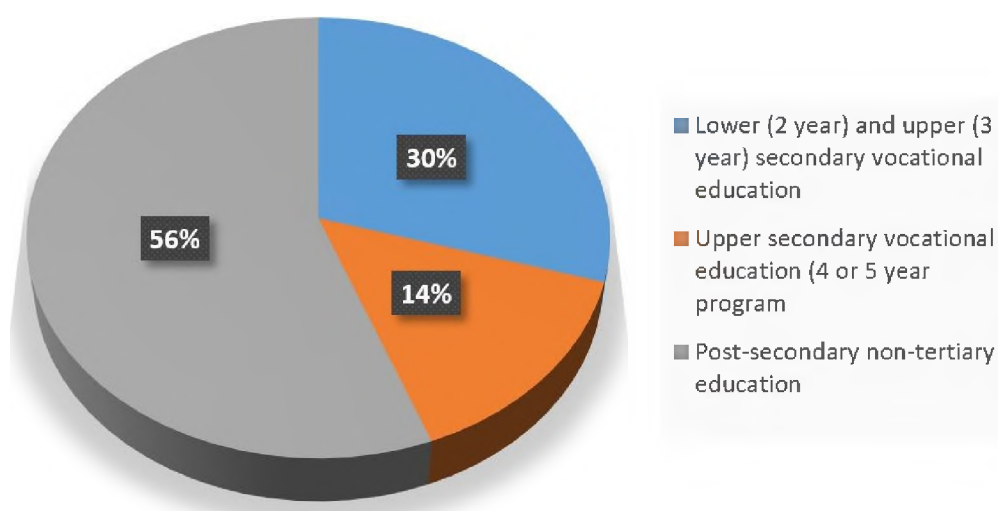


Figure 1: Share of Adults in Individual Types of Vocational Education as of September 15th, 2020 (CVTI, 2021; own processing)

Adults over the age of 18 studying part-time in *lower secondary* and *secondary vocational education* at 93 secondary vocational schools. Out of their total number it was impossible to find out how many of them had entered education with primary education as the highest or even with incomplete primary education. Therefore, no data are available on the most vulnerable group of low-educated adults. As the legislation allows them to enter secondary education even with incomplete primary education in two-year study programmes, or into three-year study programmes with completed primary education, it is assumed that it is in

these study programmes that low-educated adults are concentrated. The data in Figure 2 below are presented according to individual self-governing regions for a better understanding of the persistent differences in educational participation and economic development of individual regions of Slovakia.

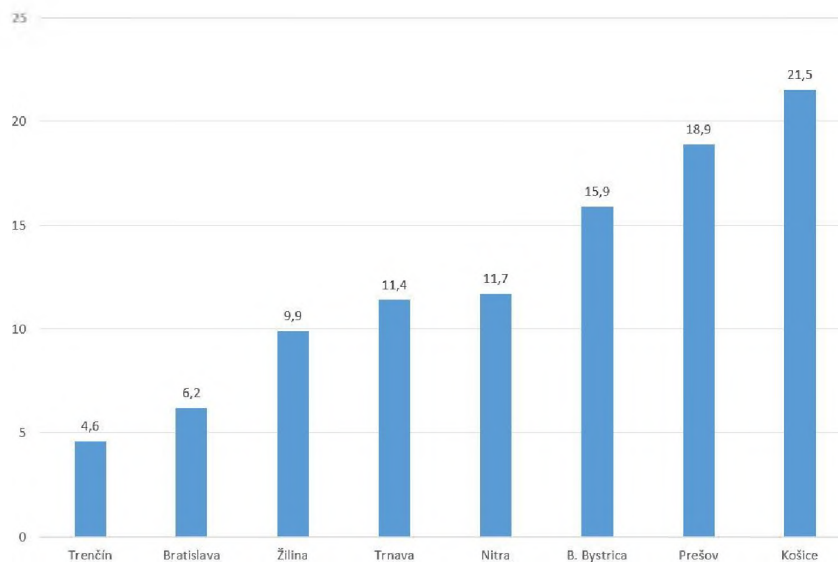


Figure 2: Adults in Lower Secondary and Upper Secondary Vocational Education (With Vocational Certificate) by Region in % (CVTI, 2021; own processing)

More than half of all adults studying in two- or three-year programmes (56.3%) were present in schools located only in three out of eight self-governing regions – Prešov, Banská Bystrica, and Košice. These regions have the highest concentration of adults with incomplete primary education and adults with completed primary education as the highest (Vančíková, 2019), and only in these regions are the least developed districts are to be found. It is likely that, more than in other regions and districts of Slovakia, there is a higher number of adults who enter secondary school with primary education at most while a significant part of them come from socially excluded environment, mainly from Roma marginalized communities. According to Filadelfiová and Gerbery research (2012) approximately 60% of Roma children spend 5 to 9 years in school, compared to 20% of their majority peers, and only 19.5% of Roma aged 20 to 24 have completed secondary education compared to 79% of the majority population.

The situation in programmes completed with a school-leaving exam is different compared to that in the lower level of vocational education. Adults over the age of 18 were studying in programmes completed with a school-leaving exam (ISCED 354 and 454) in the part-time

form at 12 schools. In the most economically developed regions (Žilina and Bratislava), the highest number of adults (58.7%) participated in study programmes with the aim to complete or expand their existing qualification.

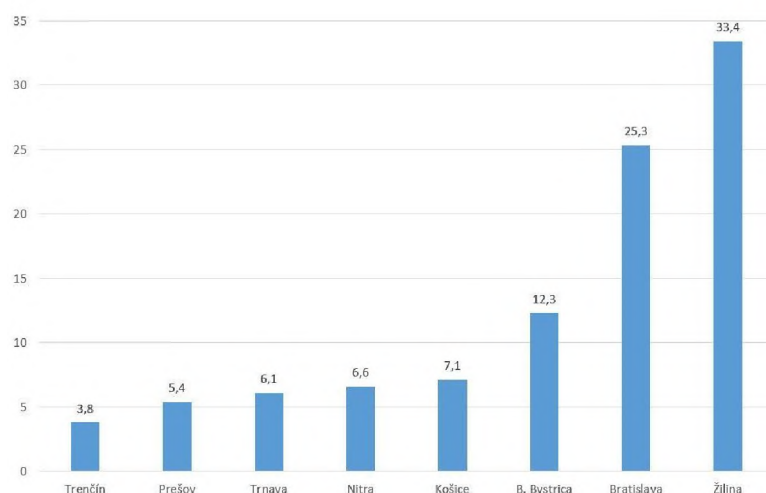


Figure 3: Share of Adults in Upper Secondary Vocational Education (School-Leaving Exam) by Region in % (CVTI, 2021; own processing)

The share of adult learners in individual regions correlates with data on the rate of early school leaving. Young people leave school prematurely to the highest extent in Eastern Slovakia (14%) and the least in Western Slovakia (6%) (Rigová et al., 2021). That is why it is in these least developed regions where the highest number of adults with a low level of education are to be found in two- and three-year study programmes of vocational education. The offer of lower levels of vocational education prevailed in economically less developed self-governing regions. On the other side, study programmes completed with a school-leaving exam in 2020, were predominantly attended in most developed regions (most options were provided in the Bratislava region [3 schools]; however, most students were studying in the Žilina region). In conclusion, the offer of vocational education and training responds to the character of the qualifications necessary for the workforce in question, the structure of the region's economy, and the predicted needs of the labour market. The above data confirm that those adults who had already completed vocational education attend secondary vocational schools in greatest numbers (the so-called Mathew effect) (Karalis, 2017). Those adults who have achieved a higher level of education (ISCED 3-8) participate in education in higher numbers (5.1% in Slovakia in 2021). They have more positive experience with initial and further education

and are, therefore, better prepared for learning (Boeren, 2009) and more often work in areas where learning is required of them (Boudard, 2001).

In 2021, the participation rate of adults in formal and non-formal education with the lowest level of education (ISCED level 0-2) was only 0.5% in Slovakia (3.3% of adults no matter educational level aged 25 to 64 were involved in formal education in EU27 countries while the number reached 1.1% in Slovakia) (Eurostat, 2021b). Slovakia is among those countries with an overall high educational level of the adult population, so such a low participation can also be explained by this⁴. What is, however, problematic is the disproportions between individual regions and social groups. In Slovakia, approximately 1% of adults participate in formal education; however, it is not known what ratio of them have (not) completed primary education. Traditionally, they participate in education least frequently, which further deepens educational and broader social inequalities. Slovakia has the highest unemployment rate of people with low education (29%), while the EU average is 14% (Hellebrandt et al., 2020).

When taking a closer look at the regional differences in unemployment statistics, the unemployed without education represented a 0.21% share of the registered unemployed in the Bratislava region, 10.8% in the Prešov region, and 7.5% in the Košice region. The Bratislava region recorded 11.01% of the unemployed with completed basic education compared to 31.6% in the Prešov region, and 32.3% in the Košice region (Ústredie práce, sociálnych vecí a rodiny SR [ÚPSVAR], 2021). The above regional disparities are closely related to the concentration of marginalised Romani communities. When comparing the geography of the Romani population in Slovakia against the map of the least developed districts, a significant overlap is obvious (e.g., Matlovičová et al., 2012). According to research of Filadelfiová and Gerbery (2012), up to 78% of those aged 16 or above are outside the school system, having only completed primary education or, in some cases, not even that. In the districts with the highest concentration of marginalised Romani communities, the secondary school programmes that involve low-skilled adults are most frequently offered. Three quarters of secondary schools offer F-programmes close to Romani excluded localities (Vančíková, 2019). Many adults without education are referred to enter secondary education through so-called F-programmes (two-year courses), which can even be entered without completing primary education. At the same time, graduates from such programmes are among the least desirable on the labour market. They are also called dead-end programmes, as, on their completion, the graduates have acquired neither primary nor secondary education with a Certificate of Apprenticeship (Rigová et al., 2021) and some even reinforce gender stereotypes (e.g., a programme called 'practical woman' for females who have not completed primary education).

⁴ In 2020, Slovakia (following the Czech Republic) had the second highest rate of adults aged 25 to 54 with an ISCED 3-4 education level, i.e. they had completed secondary education (63.7%), while the EU average was 45.5%. At the same time, the fourth lowest rate in the proportion of adults with the lowest level of education (ISCED 0-2) was recorded, specifically 6.7%, while the EU average was 18.6% (Eurostat, 2021a).

The above data point to the fact that Slovakia lags behind in the participation of adults in formal education in all educational groups of adults. Nevertheless, in the context of the overall educational level and its structure, there is no acute need for state intervention in the field of VET of adults. What is, however, troublesome is not the extent of the issue, but rather its intensity. In Slovakia, adults with the lowest level of education are ethnically and geographically concentrated in marginalised Romani communities that are typical of poverty, social exclusion, and learning difficulties at all levels of education (Rochovská & Rusnáková, 2018).

4 Uncharted Territory of Second-Chance Vocational Education of Adults in Slovakia

The concept of second-chance schools has not yet been adopted in Slovakia, even though several projects and initiatives have been implemented putting selected elements of second-chance education into practice. Just a few cogs can't make a working clock. Current legislation allows adults to study at secondary schools; however, no specific conditions are defined that would differentiate this form of study from mainstream education, which is common in many other countries (e.g., Day et al., 2013). Neither the concept, nor any self-contained supportive schemes have been accepted and there is no network of second-chance schools. There are schools where the principles of second-chance are applied; this is, however, done rather intuitively based on the actual interest and commitment of the school representatives and the teachers themselves.

VET of adults at secondary vocational schools does not follow the principles of andragogy and, in the case of adults with a low level of education (ISCED 0-2), it does not conform to the idea of second-chance education, either. Using selected system elements as an example (based on the few available academic sources available in Slovakia, our own research, and legislative amendments of the analysed areas), weak points in adult vocational education will be outlined below. Should vocational education be a true second chance for the low-educated in Slovakia, these require conceptual changes.

Placed in front of any target group of adults in any setting, no *specific training for teaching adults* is required in spite of the fact that adult education should play a key role not only in further education but also in formal education (Karikova et al., 2018; Tzovla & Kedraka, 2012). Teachers usually do not have the competences of an adult educator; thus, they apply the pedagogical competences they had acquired (Ravneberg, 2003). When working with adults, they often use inadequate methods of communication and teaching methods, or they follow their own experience and intuition (Pirohová et al., 2019). A lack of teacher-training for educating adults is pointed out by several authors (e.g., Brinia & Ntaflou, 2015; Ivančič, 2015; Martins et al., 2020; Temiaková, 2020). Teacher-training is desperately needed, especially for the education of adults from socially excluded groups, where two different worlds

with different social, economic, and cultural capital collide (Martins et al., 2020; Šuťáková et al., 2022). According to the results of the research conducted by Šuťáková et al. (2022), at the time of the research there was not a single educational programme focused on the development of teachers' competences for working with adults or a programme aimed at increasing cultural sensitivity available in Slovakia. Teachers involved in second-chance education did not feel sufficiently prepared to teach non-traditional adult learners but at the same time were not interested in whether there were educational programmes in which they could develop their competences for teaching adults. Slovak adult teachers in second-chance schools learn how to teach within their own practice and with the help of more experienced colleagues.

In our research (Pirohová et al., 2019), the *insufficient flexibility of learning programmes* has been identified. Adults mainly study in a part-time form that, on the one hand, places greater demands on the level of their learning competences, on the other hand, it allows them to more effectively coordinate their multiple social roles. Adults who have been out of the school system for a long time, and especially those who were unsuccessful in initial education, might experience significant problems with the fact that self-study, self-organisation, independence in searching for and processing information and learning resources is required from them (Kešelová et al., 2016). The part-time study is often charged. Low-qualified adults are more often unemployed or come from the lowest income social groups. Tuition fees can be a serious barrier to their involvement and retention in education. Insufficient funding of part-time studies by the state, the generally minimal interest of the low-skilled in education, and the lacking conception of their systematic education is also reflected in the lack of interest of schools in providing a second chance for those who are, in education, the most problematic group. In India, for example, in 2020 the Rajasthan State Women's Policy waived school fees for women and girls as a barrier of their returning to formal education based on the Second Chance Education Programme recommendations (UN WOMEN, 2021b). Given the long-standing lack of interest in the situation of low-educated adults in VET on the part of state education policy, there would need to be a greater and, in particular, coordinated policy effort on the part of secondary schools themselves, through their statutory organization, to demand the necessary changes in the funding of the study of adults from low-income backgrounds in secondary schools.

Another problematic area concerns the curriculum which, in VET, is mainly focused on the development of hard skills. The part-time form of study is typical of curriculum reduction, as part of the teaching is transferred to the learners. *Curriculum reduction* most frequently concerns general subjects, while subjects like civics, history, or arts are completely absent. The reduction affects those areas in which adults are assumed to have achieved a sufficient level of competence, or those that are not considered to be of fundamental importance for the job. However, many adults entering VET have not acquired a sufficient level of basic skills and key competences on which they could build specific knowledge and skills. Even

though they had undergone initial formal education, this alone cannot satisfy the changing needs of literacy throughout the life of an individual (Sulkunen et al., 2021). The content of education in VET is not flexible enough, the curriculum is not individualised, and traditional forms and methods of teaching transferred from school education of children and youths prevail (Šufáková et al., 2022). In adult education, however, it is essential to use methods that prioritise active learning and aim for the teacher to be the coordinator of the team rather than the transmitter of knowledge (Kokkos, 2005). Teachers tend to approach the adaptation of teaching to the characteristics of learners by facilitating and simplifying the curriculum with the risk of lower quality educational outputs (Lukáčová et al., 2018; Pirohová et al., 2019). There seems to be a need to implement a certain form of initial, or preparatory, education before adult learners with a low level of basic skills enter VET (Kešellová et al., 2016; Lukáč et al., 2019). Its aim would be to equip learners with such a level of basic skills, general knowledge, and learning competences that would allow them to better manage their studies in the part-time form. Otherwise, vocational education runs the risk of reductionism and reinforcing inequalities. In SCE, as Shefi (2019) suggests, high expectations of the student should be one of the principles of forming attuned teacher-student relationships, which in turn is one of the key principles of SCE programmes.

Lower demands on learners and lowering the quality of education do not lead to empowerment; on the contrary, they can legitimise the learners' low social status as unemployable, or employed in precarious jobs. On the one hand, for low-skilled adults, the acquisition of specific and applicable skills for the performance of a profession may seem to be the most pressing, on the other hand, a low level of basic skills and key competences is a risk factor for job stability in the long term (Smits, 2007). The reduced education at secondary school does not provide low-qualified adults with an opportunity to acquire and develop general skills and competences that would enable them to respond to the dynamics of the labour market, or manage their own careers. The need for the development of key competences in vocational education is included in several transnational recommendations (e.g., Council of the EU, 2018).

Some of the Slovak authors (e.g., Rigová et al., 2021; Vančíková, 2019) point to *missing concept* of second-chance education in Slovakia. Education is carried out in accordance with school legislation; this, however, does not recognise second-chance education as a concept, neither does it specify or regulate this sector of education in any way. Moreover, in Slovakia, the term second-chance education is incorrectly used only in relation to the completion of primary education (f.e. *Stratégia celoživotného vzdelávania a poradenstva na roky 2021-2030*, 2021). The lack of an SCE concept in Slovakia is most evident in the absence of teacher competency requirements, the lack of functional partnerships between schools and other local actors, and the absence of strategies to overcome barriers to participation of adults with low educational status in VET. Students involved in SCE are often unemployed, which means

they can only study part-time, otherwise, they would be removed from the register of unemployed and participation in formal education is not an instrument of active labour market measures and, therefore, is not supported legislatively and financially.

The aforementioned, as well as other reasons (missing legislation), is also related to *lacking methodological* support for schools. In the context of courses aimed at acquiring lower secondary education (completing primary school), Rigová et al. (2021) state that head teachers felt a lack of information regarding the financing of such courses or their content. It also follows from our findings within the ongoing project that, in the case of the part-time form of adult education, schools set many parameters according to their possibilities and ideas. If ambiguities occur, they also draw on the experience of other schools that have more experience in this field. In 2022, an amendment to the *Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on education and training* was passed that made it even more difficult for older low-educated adults to access VET. The amendment divided adults according to their age into pupils if they are under 27 and learners if they are 27 or over. Pupils are subject to higher funding than learners. Some schools will not be financially able to deliver part-time programmes to a wide group of adults with the lowest level of education aged over 27. In our view, it is absurd that the reduced funding does not apply to the higher forms of secondary education (post-secondary), in which adults over the age of 27 will continue to be counted as "pupils" and will therefore be allocated a higher normative rate. In our view, these changes reduce the availability of secondary education for low-educated adults at older ages and risk widening educational and social inequalities.

Since there is no concept of SCE, no *network of partnerships* that would initiate and support the education of adults in vocational education exists. Neither the schools, nor the state, nor employment offices have created a mechanism for acquiring and keeping adults in education. According to our findings, self-governing regions leave secondary schools without any support in this regard, they do not monitor the activities of schools educating adults and leave the schools' hands untied. Employment offices do not systematically cooperate with schools, there is no database of schools providing SCE in the part-time form, the information on educational offer is not collected, processed, or distributed at the local level. A functioning platform of second-chance schools could not only enforce the main principles of SCE in school practice, but also work as a key partner of the local government, the state, and the employers, in joint efforts to prevent social inequalities from deepening, as well as mitigate exclusion.

Information about the possibilities and conditions of VET as a second chance for adults is not easily accessible and is also unavailable to employment offices, community centres, and other local institutions. Therefore, the issue of low *awareness* and *availability* can be considered a serious shortcoming of the way SCE is currently carried out, which is also confirmed by other authors (e.g., Savelsberg et al., 2017; Vančíková, 2019). The preparation and launch of an information strategy on educational offer and outreach appears to be crucial,

especially for the enrolment of low-educated and often disadvantaged adults (Davies et al., 2011; Räs et al., 2014). It should be linked to the different roles of all relevant actors, provided in parallel - analogue and digital - and must be easily accessible, comprehensible, up-to-date and relevant to all educational groups of adults. But without further systemic measures to overcome the barriers to access to higher education, particularly for adults from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, even the best-prepared information strategy cannot succeed.

To conclude the present paper, let us present an example of a problem with the relative availability of vocational education in a specific district. According to the *Atlas rómskych komunít* (2019; Atlas of Romani communities), the Sabinov district was inhabited by 13,015 members of the Romani nationality. Ten years on, a significantly different state of the educational level cannot be expected; based on which it could be estimated that there are approximately six thousand Romani people who represent a potential target group for secondary education. Based on data from CVTI SR (2021), a single secondary vocational school provided lower secondary education and secondary education part-time, where 18 students enrolled. Even though the location is close to the third largest city in Slovakia, where more opportunities of part-time study are available, commuting can pose a significant obstacle to participation in education. This example was used to illustrate the urgent need to enforce the concept of SCE as the stable part of the school system.

5 Conclusion

Second chance for adults in formal education is a concept that has not been established in Slovak educational practice. There is no systematic approach in order to increase the participation of adults with the lowest level of education in formal education. Secondary schools do not provide counselling services for adults, there is no room for individual adaptation of progress in education, which would allow a flexible response to the specific life situations of adults, a coordinated approach based on partnership, and the cooperation of important actors at the regional and national level is missing. Similarly, Melesk et al. (2019) pointed out that, in Estonia, adults are not considered a target group of vocational secondary education, which creates and enhances the entry barrier: Information on learning opportunities is geared towards young learners and schools do not have the resources or skills to consider the specific needs of adult learners. As a result, this situation makes it impossible to fulfil the goals of social inclusion and jeopardises the social cohesion of entire regions, which can negatively affect the quality of life of all, not just the low-educated residents of the area in question.

One of the reasons why education of adults at secondary schools is overlooked may lie in the fact that, compared internationally, the level of education of Slovakia's population is relatively high, which means VET of adults is not a priority. Still, a closer look at the regional

disparities in the levels of education and the problematic availability of vocational education in regions with a high representation of residents who only achieved the lowest level of education reveals it is necessary to consider the introduction of the SCE concept in Slovakia as well. Based on the available statistical data, the main characteristics of adult VET in Slovakia were presented and an effort was made to answer the question whether the current system of VET of adults in Slovakia provides a true second chance.

From the viewpoint of real social inclusion, it is necessary to realise it is not vocational education and training as a whole that is troublesome; rather, higher flexibility of the educational system is needed with regard to specific groups of the population, especially socially excluded and marginalised communities. Intervention is necessary not only in the issues of the availability of education for the least educated adults, but our findings from previous research also point to the problematic course, effectiveness, and overall quality of formal education of low-qualified adults together with absent training programmes for teachers of adults, who undoubtedly need "to possess wide range of key competences and characteristics to be able to provide quality service to learners" (Mesquita & Hardalova, 2021, p. 48).

The conclusions that were reached in the analysis are also emphasised by the CEDEFOP (2020a), which has, however, been promoting an upskilling process for the low-educated for a long time rather than the concept of second chance in education. The life situation of low-educated adults cannot be solved merely by increasing their skills following the needs of the labour market. Education is more than a space for fulfilling economic motives; it is also a space for personality development and the fulfilment of broader and more permanent motives and needs. Otherwise, as Rose (2012, p. 186) claims, "those looking for a second chance will get but bare bones, a strictly functional education that does not take into account the other reasons why they return to school".

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Ethics Statement

This theoretical study did not use data from human participants, therefore it was not necessary to go through the university ethics committee approval process.

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