CROATIAN NATIONAL PLAN FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF SOCIAL DIMENSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

(2019-2021)

Background

- September 2015: Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Croatia creates the *National Working Group for Social Dimension of Higher Education*

- National Working Group was originally intended to prepare a series of action plans, proposals and analyses for carrying out goals contained in Croatian Strategy for Education, Science and Technology

- Consists of representatives of various stakeholders (students, higher education institutions, civil society), experts and Ministry representatives

- During its work, the National Working Group shifted one of its goals towards creating a more comprehensive National Plan for Social Dimension

- National Plan was finally adopted in January 2019

Vulnerable or underrepresented groups

Identification of vulnerable and/or underrepresented groups of students

- First phase of the work on the National Plan -> need for empirical evidence about underrepresentation (simple) or vulnerability (more complicated)

- EUROSTUDENT research was the main source of evidence for detection of vulnerable groups of students, in addition to a limited amount of national research

- Official document *„Underrepresented and vulnerable groups in higher education of the Republic of Croatia"* was adopted in September 2016

Vulnerable or underrepresented groups

1) Students without higher education background

2) Students of lower socio-economic status

3) Students with disabilities or challenges

4) Students studying outside of their domicile region

5) Students from rural areas and islands

6) Part-time students

7) Students of professional studies

8) Graduates from vocational secondary education

9) LGBT+ students

Vulnerable or underrepresented groups

10) Roma ethnic minority

11) Children of war veterans

12) Female students in technical field, male students in humanities

13) Students with children

14) Students who work

15) Students from alternative care

16) Homeless students and those who are at risk of homlesness

17) Older students

18) Refugees and asylum seekers

National plan

Divided into 6 overarching goals, each with a separate set of activities:

1) Systematically gather, analyse and use the data related to social dimension of higher education

2) Increase accessibility of higher education for underrepresented and vulnerable groups and remove barriers at entry

3) Provide equal opportunities to all students during studying

4) Increase completion and employment rates of underrepresented and vulnerable groups

5) Improve the system of student financial support

6) Include standards related to social dimension in quality assurance system(s)

National plan – goal 1 (Data gathering)

- **1.3. Conduct analyses and research on educational experiences of vulnerable groups of students on which there is a lack of empirical data**

- on some groups of students which were identified as vulnerable there is no direct data about their educational experience (conclusion of their vulnerability was based on indirect inferences)

- potential target groups: LGBT+ students, students whose parents are war veterans

- **1.6. Develop a standardized methodology of following educational and professional pathways of students with regard to their social and economic status**

- collection of existing good practices at Croatian HEI

- strong need for data gathering and analysis for the purpose of detection, research and reaction to vulnerability of certain groups of students

- **1.3. Evaluate effectiveness of current activities on social dimension of HE**

- many sources of direct (student grants) or indirect (food, housing subsidies) student support, but no overall data on how effective these measures are for different vulnberable groups of students

National plan (Goal 2 – before higher education)

- **2.1. Connect all levels of education in activities on social dimension**

- it was recognized that it is extremely difficult to compensate for some of the disadvantages on the level of higher education – there is a need to react earlier

- some disadvantages begin in early life and then replicate at all levels of education (various EUROSTUDENT indicators: parents' level of education – type of secondary education – type/status in higher education)

- potential target groups: students of low socio-economic status, students without higher education background, students from rural areas

- **2.2. Increase interest for higher education among vulnerable and underrepresented groups**

- outreach programmes, higher education fairs, direct work with high school students and their parents...

- potential target groups: students without higher education background, students from rural areas, Roma ethnic minority

National plan (Goal 3 – during higher education)

■ **3.1. Remove early barriers in studying**

- programmes for competences compensation at HEI, student workload assessment and reallocation...

- students from certain backgrounds (e.g. vocational secondary education) begin their studies without some of the necessary competences – HEIs can at least partly compensate for that

- student workload is often unequally distributed – this disproportionately harms vulnerable groups of students (students who have to work, students with children...)

■ **3.2. Establish non-material support system for students**

- psychological, academic, career, financial counselling

- too often focus is only on material disadvantage

- potential target groups: students with disabilities, children of war veterans, LGBT students...

National plan (Goal 3 – during higher education)

■ **3.3. Flexibilisation of study programmes**

- full-time study programmes are often to rigidly structured for some groups of students (students who work, students with children, older students...) – recognition of informal and non-formal learning can be used both to make access easier and to replace a part of the formal study programme

- e-learning and blended learning can be used to reduce the need for physical presence, therefore making it easier for some groups (students who work, students studying outside of their domicile region) to participate

■ **3.6. Improve the system of part-time studying**

- awarding some of the benefits that full-time students have to part-time students as well (scholarships, student accommodation...), limiting part-time students' tuition fees, limiting part time students' numbers at HEIs relative to the number of full-time students

- intended to diminish the gap in conditions of part-time and full-time students

National plan (Goal 4 – after higher education)

■ **4.1. Remove barriers for vulnerable and underrepresented groups related to internships**

- internships (when they are an obligatory part of study programmes) are not well-suited for non-traditional students (e.g. students who work, students with children)

- HEIs and employers should work together to create new modes of work placement for such groups of students

■ **4.6. Establishing tracking systems for graduates with focus on vulnerable and underrepresented groups**

- currently there is no reliable data about how successful vulnerable and underrepresented groups of students are after graduation – no information whether disadvantage is replicated at this level as well

- implement indicators on employment of these groups of students in Croatian performance agreements

National plan (Goal 5 – financial support)

- **5.2. Provide scholarships for vulnerable and underrepresented groups before enrolling at HEI**

- currently students receive scholarships only when they are already enrolled which creates insecurity

- potential target groups: students of lower socio-economic status, students from rural areas, students with children...

- **5.3. Make all government material support for students need-based and direct**

- analysis of efficiency of direct vs. indirect material support for students

- adjust amount of scholarships to students' expenses -> currently an average monthly scholarship in Croatia is 949HRK = ~130EUR = ~1/4 of Croatian minimum wage

- revise the criteria for awarding scholarships and student accommodation at HEIs in order to make them based on social dimension characteristics

- **5.5. Implement social dimension indicators in Croatian performance agreements for higher education**

- provide incentives to HEI to work on and develop social dimension of HE

- reliable way of tracking success in improving conditions for vulnerable groups of students

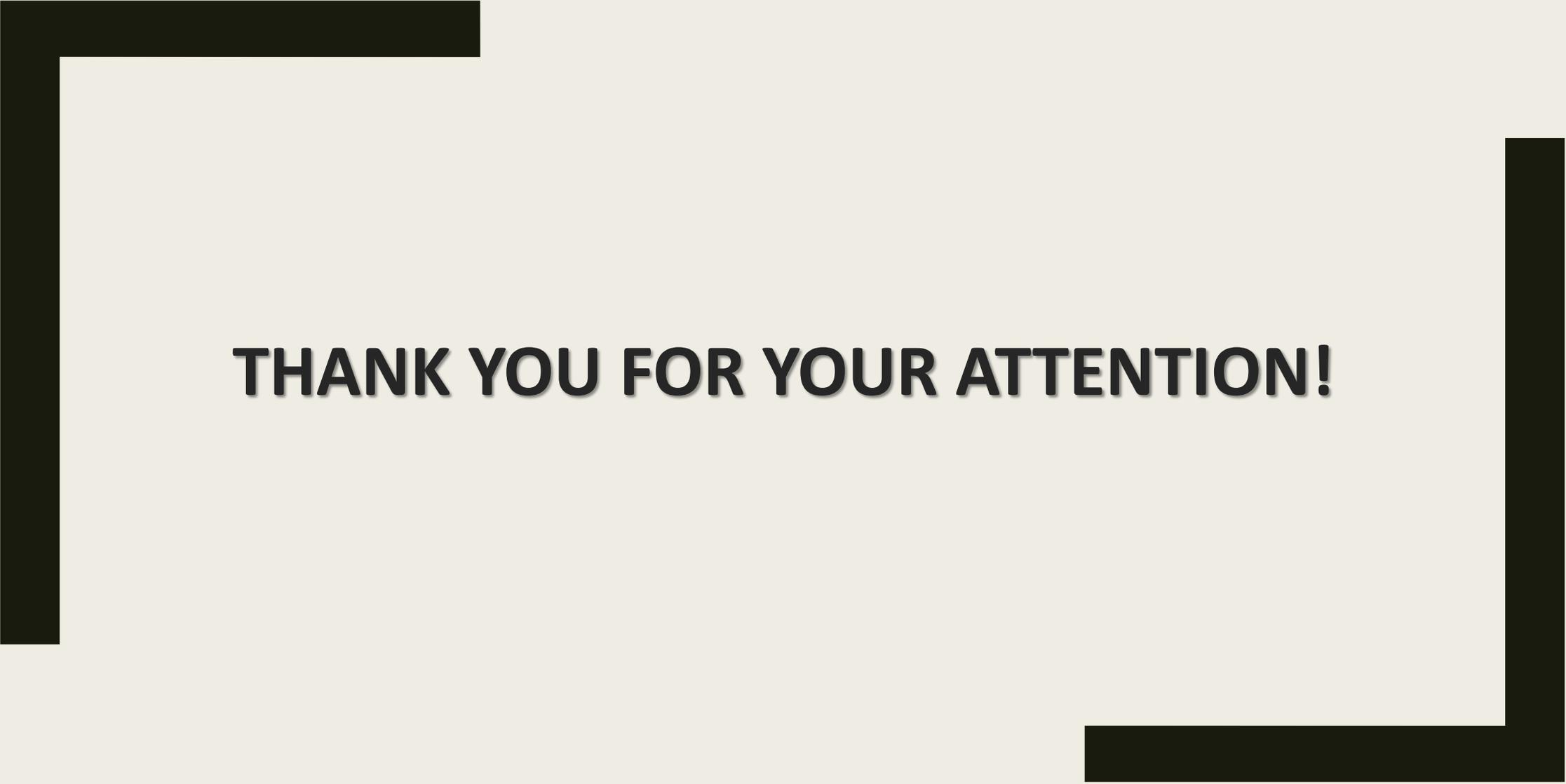# National plan (Goal 6 – quality assurance)

- **6.1. Improve the process of management and decision-making in policies related to social dimension**

- inclusion of social dimension goals in strategic documents of HEI and reliable assessment of fulfillment of these strategic goals

- **6.2. Improve internal quality assurance so that it promotes and assesses HEI's activities on social dimension**

- inclusion of social dimension goals in quality policies of HEI

- activities on social dimension part of internal audits at Croatian HEI

- **6.3. Include standards and criteria related to social dimension in Croatian external quality assurance**

- Agency for Sciences and Higher Education conducts external quality assurance in accordance with Croatian standards for assessing quality of HEI – document to include social dimension in

- creation of a certain "quality mark" for social dimension for Croatian HEI – would be received by HEIs which demonstrate that they carry out high quality activities to aid vulnerable groups of students

National plan – what will it take to succeed?

- Strong role of the Ministry and the whole Croatian Government (taking this document seriously as a strategic plan)

- Synergy between different stakeholders (HEIs, Ministry, students, employers, government agencies, local government units etc.)

- Activities for strengthening social dimension at all levels of education

- Continuous assessment of progress and reaction to challenges in implementation

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!