

On Underrepresented and Vulnerable Groups of Students: Contributions to the Enhancement of the Social Dimension of Higher Education in Croatia

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About the study I

- Central assumption of the study - students from vulnerable and underrepresented groups are faced with specific obstacles to studying that are related to their social status and/or social identity
- Recognising these obstacles is the basic precondition for strengthening the social dimension of higher education
- The focus of the study is therefore on gaining a deeper insight into the student experience in order to identify relevant obstacles that arise from their belonging to a vulnerable group

About the study II

- In addition to the findings on the student experience of the selected underrepresented and vulnerable groups the study includes two complementary analyses that are related to the social dimension of higher education in Croatia:
 - literature review of recent studies on underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students in Croatia
 - analysis of recent national policies and strategic documents of Croatian higher education institutions (HEIs)

About the study III

- The National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia 2019-2021 identified a total of 18 underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students
- Since it was impossible to cover all 18 groups the study focuses on some less-researched groups of students

Selected underrepresented and vulnerable groups

- In this research we focused on:
 - students who are refugees and asylum seekers,
 - students from the Roma minority,
 - LGBTQ+ students,
 - students from alternative care systems,
 - female students in the technical field,
 - male students in the humanities, and
 - students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans

Analysis of the student experience

- December 2019 - March 2020
- 18 focus groups and interviews
- 58 students from underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students:
 - refugees and asylum seekers – 4
 - Roma minority – 2
 - LGBTQ+ - 11
 - students from alternative care systems - 6
 - female students in the technical field – 11
 - male students in the humanities - 10
 - children of Croatian Homeland War veterans - 14
- Students of different studies and different years of study at higher education institutions in Zagreb, Rijeka, Osijek, Split and Varaždin

Analysis of the student experience - research questions

- In relation to the student experience of the selected groups of students, the following research questions have been identified:
 - what is the study **experience** of students from the selected underrepresented and vulnerable groups?
 - what are the **reasons** for a more difficult study experience or potential exclusion from the higher education system of students from these groups?
 - what are the study-related **needs** of students from underrepresented and vulnerable groups?

Students with asylum/refugee status

- The dominant obstacles are related to the **unavailability of information and the untransparent** process of enrolment in HEIs and the recognition of previous qualifications:

Difficult, first of all, there's nobody who can give you the right information. Every time I come to the faculty, I get different information. (Omar)

I would send an email, but you know that it's always embarrassing and really hard to ask for something from the people you know and beg them to help you. It would be much easier and simpler if there was a system I could monitor and get involved in. Instead of begging and pulling people by the sleeve to do something for you. That would be great for me. (Ahmet)

Students with asylum/refugee status

- **Insufficient knowledge of the Croatian language**, which in some cases makes it impossible to enroll in higher education immediately after receiving a decision on their status:

So the first hurdle was the language, so I'm still struggling and wrestling with it. And as soon as I finish this semester, I hope to enroll in some courses in Croatian so I can better keep up with the literature. (Ahmet)

- **Financial problems** - they do not apply for existing scholarship calls and most often cannot count on financial assistance from their families. Students have to work in addition to their studies, which makes it difficult to coordinate their work and study obligations:

I came here alone, without a family and my family in Turkey doesn't help me because they don't have that much money, so I'm starting from scratch and I don't have anything. (Ahmet)

So I think, it's the hardest to combine working and studying. (Amir)

Students from the Roma minority

- **Challenging financial situation** (the costs of studies are largely covered by available scholarships, students occasionally work while studying which can negatively affect the fulfilment of their study obligations)
- **Discrimination and stigmatization** in the wider society as well as among colleagues at the HEIs:

But the most important thing for me is discrimination. We feel great fear. Specifically, when I go to the hospital for internship, I meet doctors, patients and so on. In every conversation with doctors or nurses, I feel afraid that every minute now they'll say the word Gypsy. And of course, when I feel that fear, believe it or not, they say that word. It affects me very much and the saddest thing is that all the girls who're my colleagues look at me. And how would you feel, I mean, there are 100, 110 students around you and suddenly they say that word, and I'm so terrified, oh my god. (Snježana)

Students from the Roma minority

- **Incomplete knowledge of the Croatian language and often insufficient secondary education:**

I think most primary school teachers think, I mean underestimate us Roma. In fact, they have a very, very large capacity, it's just that they need to be motivated a little more, to draw a little more from them, so they see that they can. Then one day they'll start proving it, like it's really like that, let's do it. (Veronika)

- **Family members' lack of understanding and support for (higher) education:**

...I think we should work harder on the literacy of the Roma family and their awareness that their children need to be educated. (Veronika)

LGBTQ+ students

- **Psychological difficulties** (insecurity and fear of rejection or denunciation by family members, friends, or professors and colleagues):

*For me personally, it's depression and anxiety that make studying more difficult, because I don't have the energy for anything. Somehow I force myself, but I don't have that, I have no idea how. So... I kinda get a feeling that if I had the energy and the will and the motivation, then I would be a superman, but right now I'm just some small dots. [This] is currently the most difficult part of studying...
(Natalija)*

- Potential **negative consequences** on the students' social life (e.g. isolation from the social environment and friends), but also for the regular fulfilment of study obligations (lack of motivation to learn, missing lectures or assignments, etc.):

LGBTQ+ students

...it's difficult if, say, you're among people you don't know or if you want to join a new crowd and you don't know how tolerant they are, how much they're not, because every time it's a risky situation when you always come into something and it's an additional stress psychologically, and I mean, and sometimes I just don't feel like it, and then let's say I don't see anyone for a month, then I'm depressed again because I don't have a social life 'cause I don't see anyone for a month, but then I have to work and I have to work for the faculty.
(Mia)

- **Homophobia** of the environment, both in the wider society and at HEIs (offensive and/or stereotypical content in certain courses, insufficient organizational sensitivity for the specific needs of LGBTQ+ students, their generally poor visibility at the institution level, including a lack of relevant information and institutional assistance)

Students from alternative care systems

- **Uncertainty of the right to scholarships and dormitory accommodation** - both depend on the status of full-time students:

So, it's like, that as long as you're a [full-time] student you have everything, when you're not a student you're done. Simple. Short and clear. No alternative. (Hrvoje)

- **Insecurity and stress** in students due to the pressure to meet the study obligations on time that is present for the entire duration of the study:

So we have to pass everything in the first go. It's that extra pressure again, so you're, you just have to push and you can't make a single mistake in order to, 'cause it's just clear what'll happen to you. This is what creates an additional problem in your head. (Hrvoje)

Students from alternative care systems

- **Part-time students** from the alternative care cannot exercise the right to a student dormitory - which is why their monthly scholarship typically does not cover their study-related costs
- **Social and emotional barriers** to study (distrust of the social environment, problematic family relations, misunderstanding and lack of support from loved ones, possible psychological problems):
...most of them are afraid to communicate with, they're very closed off and withdrawn because they've created these walls around them and now those walls need to be torn down somehow to get into some kind of a normal life. That they can communicate with other people. This is I think the most difficult circumstance, this socialization, because they've lived within some frameworks that are known to themselves their whole life, and then something new comes along that's totally unknown to them, and I think that's the biggest problem. (Stjepan)
- These difficulties may be **particularly pronounced** in the periods of transition, at the beginning or at the end of the studies (existential uncertainty)

Female students in the technical field

- **Gender stereotypes related to the choice of study** – pressure from family members or other close people:

So, as much as he [the father], in quotes, helps me with that, he didn't want me to enrol there because he knew what this life on a ship that I wanted meant and then he said it's just not a place for me, for a woman. But I had the courage to go after what I wanted.

(Vanja)

- In communication with professors and male students female students face **prejudices about technical studies as a “male” field** not suited to woman:

...there are definitely prejudices and stigmas and stereotypes about our position at the faculty. I've personally faced some of them and for example professors who don't believe that I'm capable of passing a course which I've proved that I am. (Ankica)

Female students in the technical field

- **Some female students** also believe that there are differences between girls and boys in experiences or prior knowledge and ways of cognitive functioning that can make it more difficult for girls to study technical studies:

...maybe it happened to me personally that I sometimes catch on less and more slowly than my male colleagues, somehow I've the impression that, they seem to know it better, I don't know where they got it from. (Štefica)

- Fear of **gender discrimination in the labour market** after graduation:

just hope I don't miss some opportunities that might be offered to someone and not to me because of this minor difference because I'm a woman, the family, whatever. I just hope I'll get lucky there, if not it doesn't matter... (Lidija)

Male students in the humanities

- Belonging to an underrepresented gender group students **do not perceive** as an obstacle to success in their studies
- An awareness among students of a certain stigmatization of men in “the humanities” (associated with a lower reputation of professions in the traditionally „female” humanities) - may **deter them from enrolling in the humanities:**

I agree with that, because it's always like, and the teacher, that's nothing, anyone can do it. And I've heard a lot of times that some were in that role for a short while, they tried to do something for 5 minutes and then there was total chaos. And then, hats off to you if you can keep them interested, and then do some actual work with them. And I think it's also the problem of the state that doesn't contribute to that, because in my opinion health care and education should be the two main things, both in the financial sense and in terms of values and morals. (Vladimir)

Male students in the humanities

- Belonging to an underrepresented group at their faculties is not cited by students as a difficulty, but as a **possible advantage** (a certain benevolence on the part of professors towards male students):

I totally agree and I think the professors really take good care of us. We're their treasure. And they keep emphasizing how nice it is to see men at this faculty, that it's not just women, because there's a bit too much of them, so they get fed up with everything. (Petar)

- Students are **mostly satisfied with the cooperation and communication** within their study groups:

Well I think this is at a high level, that we help each other a lot and that we're often in communication. (Ivan)

Students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans

- The difficulties and obstacles that the students encounter in their studies they mainly **do not relate** to their belonging to a vulnerable group:

It all depends on whether that child, whether the parents have exercised their rights. If they did, then it doesn't make it difficult for him, if they didn't, it can absolutely make it difficult for him. Now I don't know what the general situation is in Croatia in that regard. It doesn't make it hard for me. (Mirko)

- Possible **psychological problems of parents** that act as stressors in families and can constrain their children in their educational choices and experience:

...but there are some children of veterans whose parents simply came out very damaged from it. Both mentally and some physically and perhaps in that way they transferred to their children, unwittingly, that psychological burden. (Sandra)

Students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans

- **Complicated administrative requirements** because of which some students give up their claims to a scholarship for children of Croatian Homeland War veterans:
But, that, I gave up on it [scholarship of the Ministry of Veterans] because there's so much paperwork, so much wrangling, like Marija says, for this pittance, which you have to wait for I don't even know how long, it never comes on time... (Vesna)
- There may be significant differences within this group in terms of the vulnerability of the student population

Recommendations - Students with asylum/refugee status

- Improve availability and accessibility of information related to studies in Croatia
- Clearly define HEI enrolment procedures and make them easily accessible
- Improve the availability of information on scholarship opportunities
- Organize preparatory Croatian language courses at the university level
- Ensure multiple daily meals in student restaurants
- Introduce a peer counselling system in which students with similar experiences can give advice to other students

Recommendations - Students from the Roma minority I

- Provide timely information to parents, high school students and teachers, and university students on the possibilities of enrolment in HEIs (e.g. the right to scholarship) and the functioning of the higher education system
- Provide some type of additional classes for the purpose of academic empowerment and acquisition of knowledge that is expected in higher education (e.g. foreign languages), both during high school and studies
- Ensure the right of direct enrolment to more HEIs
- Improve the availability of information on scholarship opportunities and dormitory accommodation

Recommendations - Students from the Roma minority II

- Give part-time students the right to dormitory accommodation
- Ensure funding for public transportation from the place of study to the place of living (e.g. on the weekends)
- Introduce a peer counselling system in which students with similar experiences can give advice to other students
- Inform members of the Roma community about the benefits of higher education
- Encourage educational and other intercultural activities aimed at connecting with the Roma community

Recommendations – LGBTQ+ students

- Establish centres for psychological and counselling support on all educational levels
- Encourage the establishment of LGBTQ+ student associations at all HEIs
- Encourage the introduction of diversity-sensitive study curricula and point HEI teachers to the problems of LGBTQ+ students
- Ensure synergistic activities of educational institutions, competent state institutions, LGBTQ+ associations and the media on the development and implementation of equality policy of LGBTQ+ persons in higher education and education in general

Recommendations – Students from alternative care systems I

- Introduce high school students and teachers to all important information related to the possibility of enrolling in higher education
- During secondary education, provide forms of additional education for the purpose of academic empowerment and acquisition of knowledge expected in higher education studies
- Establish psychological counselling offices at all HEIs
- Periodically organize meetings for students with professional staff at HEIs in order to provide psychological and other forms of support

Recommendations – Students from alternative care systems II

- Introduce a mentoring system by professors or senior students as an additional form of study support
- Ensure that students retain student rights even if they “lose” a year
- Allow students to stay in dormitories throughout the year
- Give part-time students the right to dormitory accommodation
- Provide transitional financial support and dorm accommodation after graduation
- Provide pro-active assistance from various institutions in finding the students’ first job

Recommendations – Female students in the technical field and Male students in the humanities

- Organize trainings for primary and secondary school students and teachers with the aim of reducing gender stereotypes related to various occupations and areas of human activity
- Provide earlier career guidance and counselling during high school
- Organize trainings for professors at HEIs with the aim of reducing gender stereotypes
- Introduce disciplinary regulations at HEIs with defined sanctions for professors who behave inappropriately

Recommendations – Students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans

- Establish psychological counselling offices at all HEIs
- Ensure the transparency of the criteria for various scholarships, as well as the transparency of scholarship call results
- Simplify the administrative requirements for applying for scholarships

Conclusion I

- Awareness of the importance of the social dimension of higher education
- The scope of the social dimension is addressed in a rather limited way
- The focus of existing research and strategic documents and policies is on a relatively small number of vulnerable groups (primarily students of lower socioeconomic status/parental educational status and students with disabilities)
- Most other vulnerable groups are not mentioned in strategic documents and policies

Conclusion II

- The measures that already exist within the higher education system (e.g. public scholarships) should be further developed and adapted to other identified groups, in accordance with their needs
- We identified the aspects of vulnerability and underrepresentation that were not addressed by existing measures, and for which new solutions are proposed
- The presented recommendations refer to the proposals for improving institutional policies at the level of higher education institutions, as well as national educational policies level

Thank you!

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