

NATIONAL PLAN FOR ENHANCING THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA (2019 – 2021)

UNDER-REPRESENTED AND VULNERABLE
GROUPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION
IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

GUIDELINES FOR ENHANCING THE SUPPORT
SYSTEM FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES
IN HIGHER EDUCATION
IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA



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Author: Bruno Fantulin

In the last decades the European higher education has been facing a changing population structure, migrations, rising social inequality and unemployment, rapid technological developments and the new workplace demands of the 4th industrial revolution. All of these ask for new solutions and new approaches to the inclusion of vulnerable and under-represented groups in the society, economy and education. The European Union is strategically oriented towards increased participation in higher education not only because it realises how necessary it is to have highly educated and well-qualified citizens, but also in order to develop as many available talents as possible. And that is the reason why inclusion and the social dimension of education are among the key topics within the European Higher Education Area, and the field in which so many countries are currently taking action.

The Republic of Croatia recognized the importance of developing the social dimension in the 2014 Strategy of Education, Science and Technology which served as a basis for establishing the National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in 2015. I was honoured to be invited to join the Group as an expert in the field, and I accepted the invitation with pleasure and enthusiasm. We approached our task strategically and with full awareness that we are creating a multi-sectoral development policy. Our first step was to identify the target groups in cooperation with the public and numerous stakeholders. Working jointly and in an open dialogue, we analysed the obstacles to access to higher education, obstacles to successful studying and completion of higher education, and finally, the obstacles in accessing the labour market. Our work on developing the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia took time as we wanted to be thorough, and I am grateful for the exceptional and diligent work of everyone who participated.

While the National Plan was undergoing public consultations, I was appointed the minister of science and education, and I am proud that the Government of the Republic of Croatia adopted the Plan during my

mandate as a minister. With the adoption of the Plan on January 3rd, 2019, Croatia became one of the three countries in the European Union that have a specific strategic document on the social dimension of higher education, together with Austria and Ireland.

I always believed that Croatia can be a country that unites and connects, that integrates differences and respects all of its citizens equally, a country which understands higher education as a public good that has to be available to everyone, regardless of their social, economic or any other status. At the same time, as a teacher, researcher and minister, I have always insisted on quality and excellence, which is why I believe that improving the quality of higher education is as important as enhancing equality within it. Research shows that these two apparently conflicted goals are in fact inseparable: group heterogeneity seems to be crucial for creating new perspectives which in turn produce added value and increase the quality of education and work, resulting in innovative approaches and developments yet unimagined. This is one of the many reasons why we need to increase the inclusiveness of the whole education system. I believe that this National Plan will serve as an encouragement, primarily to the academic community, to demonstrate social responsibility and to recognize inclusiveness as an advantage and opportunity to adopt new ideas, approaches and solutions. I find the National Plan to be an excellent basis for further research and studies, and for developing new theories and practices in reaching out to all potential students – all aimed at creating a country of knowledge, creativity and innovation, a country of equal opportunities for everyone.

Thus I invite all higher education institutions and all other stakeholders to take part in the implementation of the National Plan; to be proactive, innovative and creative; to jointly launch a process that will increase participation in higher education and its completion rates, creating citizens who are fully independent and responsible, fully equipped to develop a society of the future. Leaving no one behind!

Prof Blaženka Divjak, PhD
Minister of Science and Education

**NATIONAL PLAN FOR ENHANCING
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EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF
CROATIA (2019 – 2021)**

Zagreb, December 2018.

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Introduction

The importance of the social dimension of higher education has been emphasised in the Sorbonne Declaration (1998), the ministerial communiqués adopted in Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005), London (2007) and Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve (2009), as well as the Budapest-Vienna Declaration (2010) and the communiqués adopted in Bucharest (2012) and Yerevan (2015). In these ministerial declarations and communiqués, the social dimension emerges from the notion of higher education as a public good that should be affordable to everyone, regardless of the socioeconomic status of specific social groups. Within the context of the Yerevan Declaration, ministers of higher education of the countries participating in the Bologna Process have adopted the Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the European Higher Education Area by 2020. Within the framework of the Strategy, European ministers of higher education committed themselves to the development of effective public policies aimed at ensuring greater access to quality higher education, especially for students from under-represented and socially vulnerable groups. At the same time, they agreed to adopt national plans or strategies to identify different under-represented and vulnerable groups of students and to adopt specific measures and activities to improve access, successful learning and completion of studies. This document contributes to the aforementioned objectives in the Croatian context.

Although the social dimension is a field of public policy largely linked to the Bologna Process, other strategic documents also emphasise the importance of high-quality and relevant higher education that is equitable, affordable and provides equal opportunities as being the key to reducing social inequalities. Following the strategic dimensions of Europe 2020 and its target of 40% of the population aged 30 to 34 completing tertiary education, the Social Investment Package adopted in March 2013 aimed to contribute to strengthening social cohesion and competitiveness, with an emphasis on strategies involving education, health and social services and investing specifically in young people who come from unfavourable socioeconomic circumstances.¹

As a result of the European strategic context in which national higher education policies are developed, the availability, accessibility and affordability of higher education have also become strategic features of recent Croatian strategic programming documents that were eventually issued in the first comprehensive national education strategy, the Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (Official Gazette, No. 124/14). Among the main objectives of the Strategy relating to higher education is ensuring “the availability of higher education to everyone, in accordance with individual ability”, while “the inclusion of under-represented groups in the higher education system is one of the priorities for the development of education in Croatia”.²

The social dimension of the Croatian higher education system is reflected in several important measures primarily related to the funding of higher education institutions and the student grant system. With regard to institutional funding, a new model of three-year funding agreements (in Croatian: *programsko financiranje*, or “programme funding”) was launched in 2012 with the aim of encompassing the greatest number of students with a new model of tuition-fee subsidies and streamlining performance-based funding in order to achieve agreed strategic and programmatic objectives. An initial pilot-phase of funding

1 European Commission (2013). Towards Social Investment for Growth and Cohesion — including implementing the European Social Fund 2014-2020. Translation. *Revija za socijalnu politiku [Croatian Journal of Social Policy]*, 20 (2), 167-190.

2 Objective 6. Improve the student financial support system, especially with regards to the social dimension of higher education <http://www.novebojeznanja.hr/strategija/visoko-obrazovanje/12>

agreements was concluded between the former Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, on one side, and public universities, polytechnics and schools of professional higher education, on the other, for the three-year period between the academic years 2012/2013 and 2015/2016. Among the strategic objectives of these agreements, three of the five agreed general objectives included the social dimension of higher education: 1) obtaining qualifications in the period envisaged by the study programme; 2) facilitating access to studies and to study support for students of lower socioeconomic status and students with disabilities; 3) facilitating access and assuring the quality of studies for students over 25 years of age. An analysis of the implementation of the pilot funding agreements showed that the first general objective was selected by four out of seven public universities and by nine out of fourteen public polytechnics and schools of professional higher education, that the second general objective was selected by four out of seven public universities and by four out of fourteen public polytechnics and schools of professional higher education, and that the third of the above-mentioned general objectives was selected by four out of seven public universities and by two out of fourteen public polytechnics and schools of professional higher education.

Further changes to the policy of funding tuition-fee subsidies for full-time students have ensured both continuity of (and additional sensitivity towards) the social dimension of higher education in the three-year period following the end of the implementation of the pilot funding agreements. New agreements for co-financing the costs of study of full-time students and the material costs of higher education institutions were concluded between the former Ministry of Science, Education and Sports and public polytechnics and schools of professional higher education for the academic years 2015/2016, 2016/2017 and 2017/2018. In these agreements, two of the three strategic objectives included the social dimension of higher education: 1) ensuring equal access to higher education for all full-time students in the Republic of Croatia; 2) encouraging completion of higher education.³

In order to increase both access to higher education and completion rates, a complementary policy to the provision of tuition fee subsidies for full-time students has been the increased investment in student grants in recent years. The Operational Programme "Efficient Human Resources 2014-2020"⁴ secured a total of 22,000 grants for students of lower socioeconomic status and 15,000 grants for students enrolled in study programmes in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), as well as in ICT and other priority fields defined through smart specialisation, national economic development strategies and key development technologies set out in the Industrial Strategy of the Republic of Croatia 2014-2020. This means that from the academic year 2017/2018, 13,000 grants will be awarded annually, including the 5,000 State Scholarships (*Državne stipendije*) that were previously secured annually in the state budget of the Republic of Croatia.

According to the Ministry of Science and Education, State Scholarships are received by an average of 5,400 students a year, accounting for 4.5% of the total student population. However, an average of 11,500 students apply for State Scholarships under the category of students of lower socioeconomic status and 10,000 of them meet the criteria. These criteria include having an income per household member of less than 65% of the national budget base, at least 45 ECTS credits earned in the previous academic year and an average of 40 ECTS credits earned during all study years. Due to lack of resources, a total of 4,600 students who meet the prescribed criteria are not able to receive a State Scholarship. These are the students who are potentially most at risk of dropping out of their studies.⁵

3 In accordance with the Decision of the Government of the Republic of Croatia on the conditions, criteria and method of subsidising tuition fees of full-time students and co-financing the material costs of public higher education institutions in Croatia in the academic years 2015/2016, 2016/2017 and 2017/2018. <https://vlada.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/Sjednice/2015/238%20sjednica%20vlade/238%20-%204.pdf> the indicator for each objective is defined as the share of resources allocated to activities aimed at achieving the objective, in relation to all resources allocated under the Agreement. The agreements stipulate that the activities aimed at implementing the measures must primarily be directed towards students with greater difficulty in accessing study programmes. If the activities are indirect, their cost is not included in the calculation of the target value of the indicator. Furthermore, the ministry issued a recommendation that these indicators should not be less than 1% for students with a lower socioeconomic status, nor less than 0.5% for students with disabilities. According to the defined indicators, the amount that higher education institutions annually spend on activities concerning students with a lower socioeconomic status is HRK 8.2 million and HRK 2.8 million on activities concerning students with disabilities. This amounts to HRK 11 million out of a total of HRK 319 million that are annually awarded to higher education institutions, while the annual amount spent on achieving the same objective in the pilot funding agreements was HRK 2.5 million, compared to a total of HRK 225 million.

4 Operational Programme "Efficient Human Resources 2014-2020" <http://www.strukturnifondovi.hr/op-ucinkoviti-ljudski-potencijali-2014-2020-780>

5 The Ministry of Science and Education carried out an analysis of the importance of the eligibility criteria for the State Scholarships on the basis of data from the 2016/2017 call and published the results of the analysis on the Ministry's web site together with the results of the call. According to

In addition, the Ministry of Science and Education increased the amount of student financial support in 2017 to cover part of the cost of transport for full-time students with disabilities from HRK 1,000 a month to HRK 1,500 a month for the academic year 2016/2017.

In accordance with the Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (Official Gazette No. 124/14), the National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education has been tasked with drawing up the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia. The National Plan is a proposal for the operationalisation of the part of the Strategy for Education, Science and Technology relating to the social dimension of higher education. It proposes concrete objectives, sub-objectives and activities undertaken by institutions and bodies in higher education, as well as other relevant parties in the education system. Additionally, the National Plan proposes measurable indicators for tracking the achievement of strategic objectives and sub-objectives.

The National Plan was preceded by drawing up two documents that are now part of the Plan: Under-represented and Vulnerable Groups in Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia and Guidelines for the Improvement of Support Services for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia. Based on empirical data and other insights, the first document lists under-represented and/or vulnerable groups in higher education in Croatia and briefly outlines the factors contributing to their under-representation and/or vulnerability. The document defines under-representation in higher education as a situation in which the proportion of a certain group of students in the higher education system is lower than their proportion in the population as a whole or is lower than in other European countries. The following under-represented groups were identified: students whose parents have a lower level of education; female students in technical fields and male students in the humanities; mature students; students with children; and students from the Roma minority. Vulnerable groups of students include those at a higher risk of exposure to difficulties in academic or social integration and students who have fewer opportunities in some aspects of their studies, such as international mobility. The following vulnerable groups were identified: mature students; students with disabilities; students with children; students from the Roma minority; students from lower-income families; students coming from vocational schools; students under a significant strain from working while studying; students commuting to their place of study; LGBT individuals; students from the alternative care system; homeless students; students from rural areas, small towns and islands; as well as refugees and asylum seekers. Comments on the proposed document were received during a public expert discussion. The final version of this document contains amendments based on the received comments.

The other document, the Guidelines for the Improvement of Support Services for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia, was drafted based on insights into the regulations governing this field and based on the results of scientific research carried out in Croatia related to different aspects of the academic life of students with disabilities. Additional information was collected through a survey questionnaire that the Department of Higher Education of the former Ministry of Science, Education and Sports sent to all higher education institutions in Croatia regarding possible adjustments and rights in the academic environment and support services for students with disabilities. The draft document was then sent for discussion to all professional support services for students with disabilities at higher education institutions where such services exist. After the feedback was received and the corrections were made, a final version of this document was drawn up.

this analysis, only those students whose monthly household income per person was equal to less than HRK 850 were guaranteed to receive a State Scholarship. Although the income threshold was set at HRK 2,162 a month, none of the students with more than HRK 1,800 a month per household member were awarded a State Scholarship, and as many as 471 students with less than HRK 1,100 a month per member of household were still not awarded a State Scholarship. Furthermore, out of 82 students with children, 20 were not awarded a State Scholarship even though they had met the formal conditions. Furthermore, 258 students with a deceased parent, as well as 12 students with two deceased parents, did not receive a State Scholarship. In the academic year 2013/2014, the state financial support system underwent changes and more budget resources began to be allocated to direct state financial support (through grants/scholarships) rather than to indirect financial support (subsidised accommodation, meals). Thus grant funds increased from HRK 37,762,267 in 2013 to HRK 61,427,594 in 2014. This steering of state support towards students of lower socioeconomic status increased the social sensitivity and accessibility of higher education.

The two aforementioned documents are available through the website of the Ministry of Science and Education.

Drafting process of the National Plan

The proposal of the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education was largely drafted during 2016 and 2017 and the drafting process consisted of several stages.

The first stage included drafting an overview of empirical insights into the social dimension of higher education in Croatia. These are summarised in the documents *Under-represented and Vulnerable Groups in Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia* and *Guidelines for the Improvement of Support Services for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia*. These overviews were drafted to ensure that the National Plan be based as much as possible on relevant evidence.

The second stage involved holding initial consultations on the earlier versions of the aforementioned documents. A public expert discussion provided feedback to the document *Under-represented and Vulnerable Groups in Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia*, while comments on the document *Guidelines for the Improvement of Support Services for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia* were collected from staff of higher education institutions responsible for students with disabilities.

The third stage involved preparing a draft of the National Plan, taking into account similar documents aimed at enhancing the social dimension of higher education, such as the *Irish National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019*. The proposal also took into account recommendations from numerous reports relevant to the social dimension of higher education, including Eurostudent reports for Croatia and the *Report on the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia* (drafted as part of the project *Peer Learning for the Social Dimension*). The proposal of the format and content of the Plan was drafted by the members of the National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education.

The fourth phase included a public consultation (via the Croatian government's E-Consultations platform, *e-Savjetovanja*) on the draft of the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education. Comments on the draft had to be submitted between 27 July and 25 September 2017. The final version of the National Plan contains amendments based on the received comments.

Objectives

OBJECTIVE 1: SYSTEMATICALLY COLLECT, PROCESS AND APPLY DATA RELEVANT FOR ENHANCING THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

SUB-OBJECTIVE	ACTIVITY	RESPONSIBILITY	INDICATOR
1.1 Enable the single registration of student data into student records kept by the higher education institution	Integrate existing student databases	Ministry of Science and Education (MSE)	Student data are entered only once and are used in multiple records
1.2 Make the existing data on the social and economic status of the student body at all levels of higher education in Croatia publicly available	Systematise existing data of the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (the ŠV20 form) on the social and economic status of the student body at all levels of higher education	MSE in cooperation with experts	Data on the social and economic status of students published on the MSE website
1.3 Carry out analyses and research with the aim of defining under-represented and vulnerable groups and enhancing the understanding of the educational experience of students from vulnerable groups about which there are insufficient data	Collect and process data on the educational experience of vulnerable groups about which there are insufficient data at all levels of higher education (the proportion of such students, difficulties that they encounter during their studies, their proposals for improving the quality of studies)	Higher education institutions (HEIs), independent research team	Research results are presented to the general and professional public and to education policy makers; available through the MSE website
1.4 Conduct research on the reasons why students from vulnerable groups drop out of higher education	Collect and process data on the reasons why students from vulnerable groups drop out of higher education	Higher education institutions (HEIs), independent research team	Research results are presented to the general and professional public and to education policy makers; available through the MSE website
1.5 Enable the collection and analysis of comparative data on the social dimension of higher education	Provide funds for the periodic conduct of the Eurostudent survey in Croatia	MSE	Periodic Eurostudent reports
1.6. Develop a standardised methodology for monitoring the educational and professional paths of students (enrolment, study, graduation, employment) according to their social and economic status	Adopt a single, standardised methodology for verifying the social and economic status of students and other conditions of vulnerability Collect examples of good practice for monitoring the educational and professional paths of students and use them to develop a mechanism applicable to all higher education institutions in Croatia	MSE, higher education institutions, National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education	Higher education institutions databases and the central MSE database
1.7 Base activities aimed at enhancing the social dimension on relevant empirical data	Interconnect the collection of data on vulnerable groups of students at higher education institutions with re-accreditation procedures, with higher education funding and with activities of higher education institutions aimed at enhancing the social dimension	MSE, higher education institutions (HEIs)	Collection and use of relevant data for the re-accreditation and funding of higher education institutions, as well as in activities of higher education institutions aimed at enhancing the social dimension

SUB-OBJECTIVE	ACTIVITY	RESPONSIBILITY	INDICATOR
1.8 Evaluate the success of existing activities aimed at enhancing the social dimension of higher education	<p>Carry out institutional evaluations of activities aimed at enhancing the social dimension of higher education in cooperation with students</p> <p>Carry out an analysis of the efficiency of the part of the student financial support system that is managed by student centres</p>	MSE, higher education institutions (HEIs), Croatian Students' Council (CSC)	<p>List of good practices for enhancing the social dimension of higher education</p> <p>Proposals for improving the part of the student financial support system that is managed by student centres</p>

OBJECTIVE 2: FACILITATE ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR UNDER-REPRESENTED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS AND REMOVE BARRIERS TO ENROLMENT

SUB-OBJECTIVE	ACTIVITY	RESPONSIBILITY	INDICATOR
2.1 Enhance the social dimension of education by linking the vertical levels of the education system	Increase the number of members of the National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education by including representatives of pre-tertiary education	MSE	Membership of group extended; amendments made to the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension
2.2 Increase interest for higher education among under-represented and vulnerable groups	Improve the early intervention system by introducing outreach programmes (summer schools, career days, open-doors events, university fairs, scholarships fairs, science festivals) to work with students and their parents on increasing their motivation for studying	Civil society organisations, educational institutions, MSE, Education and Teacher Training Agency, Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education, National Centre for External Evaluation of Education (NCEEE), Croatian Employment Service (CES), higher education institutions, local community	<p>Number of programmes offered and number of participants involved in the programmes</p> <p>Percentage of participants who were satisfied with the implemented programmes</p>
2.3 Improve professional guidance and self-information system	<p>Establish a network of centres, departments and professional guidance services</p> <p>Launch a website to facilitate comprehensive access to professional guidance</p> <p>Additional training for professional associates and lecturers with the aim of implementing professional guidance and counselling for students and their parents</p> <p>Introduce compulsory additional counselling related to choosing study programmes for persons with disabilities when enrolling into higher education</p>	<p>MSE, ASHE</p> <p>Ministry of Labour and the Pension System (MLPS)</p> <p>MSE</p> <p>Institutional support services for students with disabilities at higher education institutions</p>	<p>Developed network</p> <p>Launched website</p> <p>Number of higher education institutions that made data available and customisable; consolidated data</p> <p>Number of additional trainings offered, number of participants (number of additionally trained professional associates and lecturers)</p> <p>Number of consultations and participants involved. Percentage of participants that were satisfied with the implemented programmes</p>

OBJECTIVE 3: PROVIDE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL STUDENTS DURING THEIR STUDIES

SUB-OBJECTIVE	ACTIVITY	RESPONSIBILITY	INDICATOR
3.1 Remove barriers during the early stages of studies	Establish competency compensation programmes	MSE, higher education institution (individual departments or centres responsible for teaching)	Number of competency compensation programmes
	Develop a study adjustment programme for vulnerable groups within the framework of student counselling	MSE; student counselling centres (setting up programmes), civil society organisations, foundations and other non-profit organisations providing grants and offering career counselling, psychosocial support to young people, etc.	Quality and usefulness of the programmes (analysis of the impact on pass levels); percentage of participants satisfied with the implemented programmes
	Perform student workload measurements for all years of study and distribute the workload equally by reviewing study programmes	Higher education institutions	Reports of the Office for Students with Disabilities (with user feedback) Reports of the university counselling centres (with user feedback) Revised study programme
3.2 Establish an effective system of non-student financial support during their studies	Establish a counselling system at higher education institutions consisting of the following elements: psychological counselling; career and financial counselling; academic counselling; counselling and support for students with disabilities	Higher education institutions, Croatian Employment Service (CES), MSE, MLPS (European Union Operational Programme Management Board)	Number of students using these programmes
	Promote the system of non-financial support, including the availability of information on the websites of higher education institutions and other forms of information	Civil society organisations involved in relevant forms of youth support	Consolidated and regularly updated information on the possibilities and content of counselling Reports of counselling centres (with customer feedback)
3.3 Increase the flexibility of study programmes	Enable students with previous or current work experience or other experience to replace part of their formal study programme using the procedures for validating informal and informal learning	Higher education institutions (centres and bodies responsible for study programmes)	Established validation procedures
	Increase the flexibility of study programmes by applying distance learning and relaxing the requirement of physical presence	Higher education institutions (centres and bodies responsible for study programmes)	Number of ECTS credits that students can obtain by distance learning, if needed
3.4 Improve learning resources	Provide learning resources and adjust teaching materials	Higher education institutions, MSE	Feedback from students who are members of vulnerable groups
	Establish a mentoring system (for lecturers and students)	Higher education institutions, students' councils	Feedback from users of the mentoring system
3.5 Provide lecturers and non-teaching staff with professional training for working with vulnerable groups	Revision of teacher-training study programmes	Higher education institutions (centres for teacher education), MSE, civil society organisations involved in this field	Revised teacher-training study programmes that integrate topics related to the social dimension
	Development of a teacher training programme for the field of work that engages with members of vulnerable groups		Continuous professional development programme developed in this field; Number of teachers that completed this programme and are satisfied with it

SUB-OBJECTIVE	ACTIVITY	RESPONSIBILITY	INDICATOR
3.6 Adjust and improve the part-time study system	Reform the part-time study system in the following way: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - stipulate the specific rights of part-time students - limit the amount of tuition fees in relation to the fees of full-time students - limit the number of part-time students in relation to the number of full-time students - ensure access to student financial support (meals, accommodation, student grants) to part-time students from vulnerable groups 	MSE, higher education institutions (HEIs)	New legislation on part-time studies Necessary practices put in place at higher education institutions

OBJECTIVE 4: INCREASE BOTH THE COMPLETION RATE OF UNDER-REPRESENTED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS AND THEIR EMPLOYMENT RATE AFTER GRADUATION

SUB-OBJECTIVE	ACTIVITY	RESPONSIBILITY	INDICATOR
4.1 Ensuring work placements for students from specific under-represented/vulnerable groups through cooperation of employers and higher education institutions	<p>Revision of study programmes with the aim of incorporating mandatory student work placements and conducting external quality evaluations</p> <p>Removing administrative and other obstacles to the introduction and implementation of student work placements with an emphasis on barriers for under-represented groups</p> <p>Provision of resources for improving study programmes and practical introduction of student training through EU funds and national resources</p> <p>Development of an information system for monitoring student work placements that could be accessed by students and employers</p>	<p>Higher education institutions</p> <p>MLPS</p> <p>MSE, CCC, CEA, MLPS (European Union Operational Programme Management Board)</p> <p>Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE)</p>	<p>Percentage of study programmes with mandatory student work placements</p> <p>Percentage of students satisfied with the implementation of student work placements</p> <p>Percentage of employees satisfied with the implementation of student work placements</p> <p>Percentage of students hired by the employer that provided the work placements</p> <p>Favourable percentage of under-rated and vulnerable groups in the above indicators</p>
4.2 Organise activities for student support centres (academic and psychological counselling, career development counselling, career student training) that help students achieve the skills required to complete their studies and support their early career development	<p>Initial analysis of the state and needs of the HEI</p> <p>Financial support for HEIs that established the centres and invested their own resources into development and networking</p> <p>Development of a network of centres in Croatia in order to develop and exchange programmes and educational materials, as well as pool virtual resources</p>	<p>HEI, MSE, CES, MLPS (European Union Operational Programme Management Board), specialised civil society organisations</p> <p>ASHE</p>	<p>Number of centres, number of employees in the centres, number of activities related to completion rates and early career development, number of users</p> <p>Satisfaction of users—especially those from under-rated and vulnerable groups—with the services provided by the centres</p> <p>Number of members in the centre network</p>

SUB-OBJECTIVE	ACTIVITY	RESPONSIBILITY	INDICATOR
<p>4.3 Evaluate HEIs with regard to their support for graduates' early career development based on a unique maturity model (i.e. determine the level of the HEI in terms of the support it provides students in early career development) and whether the HEI meets the requirements of the Croatian Qualifications Framework (CROQF)</p>	<p>Implement models for monitoring the activities of HEIs based on the accepted maturity model of the HEI, with regard to the support it offers in early career development of graduates, with an emphasis on equal opportunities for all students</p> <p>Self-evaluation and/or internal and/or external evaluation of the HEI according to the level of maturity related to support</p> <p>Reporting on the state of HEIs in Croatia and recommendations for improvement</p> <p>Drafting recommendations for evaluating study programmes in compliance with qualification standards</p> <p>Alignment of study programmes with qualification and occupational standards</p> <p>Self-evaluation and/or internal and/or external evaluation of the HEI according to the level of maturity related to compliance with the CROQF</p>	<p>ASHE, HEI, MSE</p> <p>National Council for the Development of Human Potential in the Republic of Croatia</p>	<p>Accepted HEI maturity model with regard to early career development</p> <p>Raising the achieved maturity level by one level in the subsequent four years</p> <p>Recommendations for evaluating HEIs on their compliance with the CROQF</p> <p>Number of qualification standards and associated study programmes in the CROQF Register</p> <p>Number of study programmes compliant with the CROQF</p>
<p>4.4 Include HEIs in specific support programmes for employment and education through EU funds (Youth Guarantee)</p>	<p>Coordination of activities of MSE, CES and HEIs</p>	<p>CES, MSE, MLPS (European Union Operational Programme Management Board)</p>	<p>Return of drop-outs into higher education, particularly those from under-represented groups</p>
<p>4.5 Further develop funding agreements by incorporating the monitoring of agreed indicators related to under-represented/vulnerable groups and the activities of the Plan related to completion of studies and employment</p>	<p>Develop funding agreements focused on outcomes, rather than input parameters</p> <p>Provide additional financial resources for studies with a high employment rate after graduation for the purpose of increasing admission quotas</p> <p>Provide additional resources for studies in which the proportion of under-represented and/or vulnerable groups in the graduate group is equal to (or higher than) the proportion of enrolled students</p>	<p>MSE, CSC, representatives of external stakeholders</p>	<p>Clear indicators set in funding agreements related to completion rates within 150% of the nominal duration of studies and related to the employment of graduates</p>
<p>4.6 Monitor employment of graduates four months after graduation and undertake regular reporting (by HEIs)</p>	<p>Set up a monitoring and reporting system regarding the employment of graduates (interconnect this activity with external evaluation procedures of the HEI)</p> <p>HEI monitors employment rates of graduates (in their profession) from under-represented and vulnerable groups</p>	<p>CES, ASHE, HEI</p>	<p>Percentage of employed persons four months after their graduation</p> <p>Percentage of HEIs with an alumni monitoring system</p>

OBJECTIVE 5: IMPROVE THE STUDENT FINANCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR MEMBERS OF UNDER-REPRESENTED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS

SUB-OBJECTIVE	ACTIVITY	RESPONSIBILITY	INDICATOR
5.1 Consolidate and centralise the collection of data on student financial support at a national, local and institutional level.	Establish a joint information system for providing student financial support (combining all of the activities listed below).	MSE	Different information systems and databases combined into a joint information system
	Establish a system for means-testing students	MZO, MFIN	Reliable means-testing through a joint information system – income and receipts from the Tax Administration’s EDIP system
	Launch a joint national database on student financial support (including a grant database)	MSE, in cooperation with professional organisations/ civil society organisations in this field	National online database launched and publicly available
	Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of various forms of student financial support (grants provided by the MSE, HEIs, local and regional government units; subsidies for meals and accommodation, etc.), with a special focus on under-represented and vulnerable groups	MSE	Annual reports published
	Initiate the exchange of good practices among institutions that provide student financial support (peer learning), with a special focus on under-represented and vulnerable groups	MSE, by providing financial resources for such projects through EU funds	Number of published calls for proposals and number of funded projects; Number of examples of good practice entered into the joint information system; Number of organised public meetings on this topic
	Analyse the data collected on providing financial support to under-represented and vulnerable students through research and professional projects, incentivised by public and private funding.	MSE, CEA, CCC, companies; Higher education institutions, professional organisations, civil society organisations	Number of scientific and professional projects launched on this topic and number of published papers
	Analyse the validity of the existing taxation model for students working on student contracts	MSE	Validity analysis conducted and published
5.2 Award grants to first-year applicants belonging to under-represented and vulnerable groups to continue their education at a higher education level and provide assistance to secondary schools whose students achieve poorer outcomes	Start a grant award programme for first-year applicants belonging to under-represented and vulnerable groups	MSE, in cooperation with local and regional government units	Number of awarded grants
	Provide professional and financial support to schools for professional training of teachers on the social dimension of education and on widening access to higher education	MSE, higher education institutions (HEIs) Civil society organisations, foundations and other non-profit organisations providing education, psychosocial support, etc. to young people	Number of partnership projects between higher education institutions and schools

SUB-OBJECTIVE	ACTIVITY	RESPONSIBILITY	INDICATOR
5.3 Student financial support from public sources should primarily be based on direct support in the form of grants; support should primarily be awarded on needs-based criteria; the monthly grant amount should be adjusted in line with the actual costs of studying	Conduct research related to shifting the student financial support system from one based on indirect support to one based on direct support (grants)	MSE	Research conducted and published
	Exempt grants from taxation	MSE, Ministry of Finance (MFIN), CSC	Amendment to the regulations
	Review the criteria for awarding public grants and base them primarily on needs-based criteria	MSE, CSC, local and regional government units	Number of calls for public grants that adopted the relevant criteria
	Establish additional criteria for awarding public grants to under-represented and vulnerable groups in addition to needs-based criteria	MSE, CSC, local and regional government units	Number of calls for public grants that adopted the relevant criteria
	Provide all students enrolled in higher education institutions with the right to apply for public grants	MSE, CSC	Data on public grants awarded to individual students available in the national online database on student financial support
	Define a scale of public grant amounts according to established needs (five levels) and actual costs of study (use a formula table) ⁶	MSE	Public availability (online) of the scale and criteria for awarding public grant amounts; Public availability of data on costs of study by publishing Eurostudent research (in a format adjusted to the end users: pupils, students, parents) on the websites of the MSE and relevant public institutions
	Adjust the timing of public grant payments in order to make them available at the beginning of the academic year	MSE, local and regional government units	Public availability of payment dates of grant instalments
	Limit the period for receiving public grants to encourage timely completion of studies	MSE, CSC, local and regional government units	Number of calls for public grant that adopted the relevant criteria
	Research into cost-effectiveness of indirect student financial support in the form of public subsidies	MSE	Conducted and published research related to cost-effectiveness
	Consider reducing or gradually abolishing indirect student financial support in the form of subsidies and redirecting these funds to public grants according to needs-based criteria	MSE	Reports of the MSE on the topic
	Increase the amount of public financial support in order to allow students to spend a certain period of their studies abroad	MSE, in collaboration with AMEUP and higher education institutions, CSC	Number and value of public grants enabling a period of studying abroad
5.4 Increase the availability of student dormitory accommodation under favourable financial conditions, with the aim of providing such accommodation for more than 20% of students	Extending accommodation capacities in student dormitories by building new and renovating existing capacities ⁷	MSE, in collaboration with higher education institutions	Increase in the percentage of students in student dormitories from the current 8% to 20% of the total number of students ⁸
	Introducing needs-based criteria as the main basis for accessing accommodation in a student dormitory	MSE, CSC	Number of public calls for applications with these criteria
	Ensure that the criteria for allocating accommodation in student dormitory give preference to under-represented and vulnerable groups of students	MSE	Number of public calls for applications with these criteria

6 See File et al. (2013). *Higher Education Funding and the Social Dimension in Croatia: Analysis and Policy Guidelines*. Zagreb: Institute for the Development of Education. See pages 65-70.

7 File et al. (2013). *Higher Education Funding and the Social Dimension in Croatia: Analysis and Policy Guidelines*. Zagreb: Institute for the Development of Education. See pp. 65-70.

8 Šćukanec, N., Sinković, M., Bilić, R., Doolan, K. and Cvitan, M. (2016). *Socijalni i ekonomski uvjeti studentskog života u Hrvatskoj: nacionalno izvješće istraživanja EUROSTUDENT V za Hrvatsku za 2014.* [Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Croatia: National EUROSTUDENT V

SUB-OBJECTIVE	ACTIVITY	RESPONSIBILITY	INDICATOR
5.5 Launch the funding of higher education institutions through comprehensive funding agreements that will contain mechanisms to enhance the social dimension of higher education	Launch a funding mechanism combining basic funding (number of enrolled students), performance-based funding (number of students who graduated) and project-based funding – incorporate mechanisms across all three funding segments to improve the social dimension of higher education ⁹	MSE	Number of funding agreements signed with higher education institutions that contain mechanisms to improve the social dimension of higher education
5.6 Launch mechanisms that will encourage companies, foundations and civil society organisations to become more actively involved in funding grants for students from under-represented and vulnerable groups	Establish regulations and procedures that will enable grants to be tax-exempt, based on which the current ceiling for tax-exempt grants will be abolished	MSE and MFIN (Tax Administration)	Adopted regulations that enable grants to be tax-exempt and that do not set a ceiling for tax-exempt grants
	Create tax incentives for those who finance student grants	MSE and MFIN (Tax Administration)	Adopted regulations that enable tax incentives for those who finance student grants
	Launch reward programmes for institutions that have developed the most effective grant programmes for under-represented and vulnerable groups of students	MSE, in collaboration with civil society organisations, CSC, CEA, CCE and companies	Award programme launched; number of awards provided
5.7 Introduce trainings on financial planning for successful studies	Adopt regulations according to which higher education institutions transparently highlight the expected study costs and possible sources of income for students	MSE and higher education institutions	Adopted regulation; Number of higher education institutions that published this information on their websites
	Introduce an elective financial literacy programme for successful studying into the final grade of secondary education for high-school students, as well as into higher education programmes for students	MSE, in collaboration with MFIN, higher education institutions and secondary schools	Number of calls for proposals for funding financial literacy projects; Number of student services at higher education institutions (e.g. career development centres, offices for international cooperation) that offer financial literacy programmes for students; Number of collaborations established with civil society organisations that offer these types of programmes
	Introduce financial literacy programmes for successful studies and the social dimension of higher education, with a particular emphasis on the needs of under-represented and vulnerable students, into continuous professional development programmes for teaching and non-teaching staff at higher education institutions	MSE, in collaboration with MFIN and higher education institutions	Number of higher education institutions that launched this type of programme Number of collaborations established with civil society organisations that offer these types of programmes
	Introduce financial literacy programmes for successful studies and the social dimension of education with particular emphasis on the needs of under-represented and vulnerable students into continuous professional development programmes for secondary school teachers	MSE, in collaboration with agencies responsible for education/ vocational education	Number of secondary education institutions that have launched this type of programme Number of collaborations established with civil society organisations that offer these types of programmes

Report for Croatia 2014]. Zagreb: Ministry of Science, Education and Sports. See pp. 66-74.

⁹ See Šćukanec, N., Sinković, M., Bilić, R., Doolan, K. and Cvitan, M. (2016). *Socijalni i ekonomski uvjeti studentskog života u Hrvatskoj: nacionalno izvješće istraživanja EUROSTUDENT V za Hrvatsku za 2014. [Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Croatia: National EUROSTUDENT V Report for Croatia 2014]*. Zagreb: Ministry of Science, Education and Sports

OBJECTIVE 6: INCLUDE STANDARDS RELATED TO ENHANCING THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION INTO THE QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

SUB-OBJECTIVE	ACTIVITY	RESPONSIBILITY	INDICATOR
6.1 Improve processes for management and institutional policy-making related to increasing the availability of higher education	Create institutional strategic documents on increasing the accessibility of higher education to vulnerable and under-represented groups and assess the impact of these strategies	Higher education institutions	Assessment of impact of the implementation strategic documents after a certain period
6.2 Improve internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions by promoting and assessing the higher education institutions' activities focused on supporting vulnerable and under-represented groups	<p>Quality policies at higher education institutions include, but are not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - enhancing the social dimension of higher education as an important component of the overall quality improvement of higher education for the benefit of all students - improvement of social inclusiveness of both students and employees <p>Quality policies at higher education institutions include, but are not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - enhancing the social dimension of higher education as an important component of the overall quality improvement of higher education for the benefit of all students - improvement of social inclusiveness of both students and employees <p>Adopt appropriate acts ensuring support (financial, teaching, mentoring etc., listed under objectives 2-5) for students from vulnerable and under-represented groups and monitoring their impact</p> <p>Establish appropriate bodies ensuring support (financial, teaching, mentoring etc., see objectives 2-5) for students from vulnerable and under-represented groups</p> <p>The efficiency of quality assurance systems at higher education institutions is also determined based on an assessment of activities implemented by the higher education institution to encourage and enable access, provide support and monitor the success, completion rates and career development of students from vulnerable and under-represented groups</p>	Higher education institutions	<p>Document adopted and published</p> <p>Appropriate acts are adopted, published and publicly available; an analysis of their impact is also conducted and published.</p> <p>Appropriate bodies established for providing support</p> <p>Internal assessments of the quality assurance system include a focus on the efficiency of internal quality assurance system from the social aspect of higher education</p>
6.3 Include standards and criteria related to the social dimension of higher education in the processes of external quality assessment of higher education institutions	<p>1. Creating appropriate criteria and processes of external quality assessment of higher education institutions</p> <p>2. Introducing a quality label or appropriate criteria for achievements of higher education institutions related to the social dimension of higher education and the social inclusiveness of both students and employees</p>	<p>ASHE, MSE</p> <p>ASHE, MSE, professional associations, civil society organisations and other organisations that are active in this area</p>	<p>Criteria and processes that include the social dimension of higher education are accepted</p> <p>Quality label or separate criterion introduced to recognise achievements of higher education institutions related to the social dimension</p>

About the objectives

OBJECTIVE 1: ACHIEVE THE SYSTEMATIC COLLECTION AND PROCESSING OF DATA RELEVANT FOR ENHANCING THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND MAKE USE OF THOSE DATA FOR THAT PURPOSE

Decision-making based on data analysis is one of the principles of the Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (Official Gazette No. 124/14). This principle is especially emphasised in the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in order to both achieve systematic collection and processing of data relevant for enhancing the social dimension of higher education and to make use of those data for that purpose.

A number of studies have been conducted in Croatia over the past several years that contain data that are crucial for addressing the social dimension of higher education. These studies have provided the basis for the document entitled *Under-represented and Vulnerable Groups in Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia*. Nevertheless, several empirical shortcomings have been noted. For instance: there is no systematic and standardised collection or processing relevant for the social dimension of higher education at each higher education institution; there is more data regarding certain vulnerable groups of students than others; and there are no data available on the success of measures and activities for enhancing the social dimension of higher education. Moreover, data on students are currently recorded in several different databases, which makes their systematisation difficult.

The sub-objectives and activities set forth in the National Plan focus on addressing these shortcomings through the following measures: the integration of existing student databases (1.1); the systematisation of existing data collected by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (1.2); the collection of new data related to vulnerable groups of students for which there is insufficient data (1.3 and 1.4); the continuation of the good practice of collecting comparative data that are significant for enhancing the social dimension (1.5); the creation of a mechanism for continuous monitoring of educational and professional paths of students (1.6); the use of these data in the process of re-accreditation of higher education institutions, in decision-making for higher education institution funding and in development of measures for enhancing the social dimension (1.7); and the collection of data regarding the success of activities for enhancing the social dimension, in order to identify good practices (1.8).

OBJECTIVE 2: FACILITATE ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR UNDER-REPRESENTED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS AND REMOVE BARRIERS TO ENROLMENT

The mission of the Croatian education system is to make quality education available to everyone under equal conditions (Strategy for Education, Science and Technology, 2014; Official Gazette No. 124/14), which certainly includes the availability of higher education to under-represented and vulnerable groups of students. With this objective, it is necessary to realise a series of early intervention measures and remove barriers to accessing higher education. This implies activities that will connect the topic of the social dimension of higher education with other levels of education (2.1), increase young people's aspirations for enrolling in higher education (2.2) and improve the existing professional guidance system, including professional informing and advising, vocational guidance and self-informing (2.3).

Early intervention in higher education primarily refers to ensuring the social dimension of pre-tertiary education and the stronger engagement of competent institutions, as well as the engagement of civil society and the local community. In this respect, a well-executed professional guidance process (involving expert associates and teachers from primary and secondary education, as well as professional guidance

counsellors from the Croatian Employment Service) will allow individuals to make appropriate choices regarding their secondary or tertiary education. Article 4 of the Primary and Secondary Education Act (Official Gazette Nos. 87/08, 86/09, 92/10, 105/10 – correction, 90/11, 16/12, 86/12, 94/13, 152/14, 7/17 and 68/18) lists the principles of education which are the footholds of professional guidance in schools, and which require students to be equipped for lifelong learning in addition to acquiring general-education and vocational competences.

Professional interests can be positively influenced by various forms of group-based informing conducted by experts from professional guidance services, trained expert assistants and teaching staff in schools (which implies the provision of focused, specialised professional trainings for the professional guidance and career development area). The introduction of elective or optional courses related to professional guidance, or introducing it as a cross-curricular topic, can also have such a positive effect (Euroguidance, 2012).¹⁰ Moreover, it is important to facilitate self-informing for students so that all information relevant to making decisions about further education or professional development are available and customised for young people. Currently, such information (as well as useful brochures and guides) are available on websites of the Croatian Employment Service (<http://www.hzz.hr/>) and its Lifelong Career Guidance Centre (CISOK) (<http://www.cisok.hr/>), the web portal Upisi.hr (<https://www.upisi.hr/upisi/>) and the Institute for the Development of Education (<http://www.iro.hr/hr/>), as well as certain higher education institutions. However, this information should be consolidated in order to make it more approachable for potential students. University fairs, scholarship fairs, summer schools, career days, open-door events, science fairs and similar activities are a valuable part of informing and motivating candidates regarding university enrolment.

In the case of applicants with disabilities, it is necessary to introduce compulsory additional counselling on the potential difficulties of achieving the learning outcomes of the study programme into which the applicant wishes to enrol. Such counselling should be implemented by coordinators for students with disabilities, heads of study programmes and vice-deans for teaching. This is necessary in order to prevent possible difficulties related to the inability to achieve certain learning outcomes of a mandatory course or study programme (due to limitations caused by physical disability, illness or other conditions) and in order to ensure all necessary adjustments in a timely manner. Such additional counselling could also be made available to other interested applicants for the study programme.

All information about study programmes, counselling, enrolment processes and timing of study programmes, equal opportunity measures, financing studies and employment opportunities needs to be made available to students. In case of students with certain disabilities, such information should be available in alternative formats.

OBJECTIVE 3: PROVIDE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL STUDENTS DURING THEIR STUDIES

One of the essential principles of the Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (Official Gazette No. 124/14) is the principle of equal educational opportunities for all, which is highlighted in Objective 6 of the higher education section of the Strategy. In order to achieve this principle, it is necessary to act during the early stages of students' studies and remove the barriers faced by students, in particular students from vulnerable groups. The highest dropout rates in tertiary education take place precisely during the first year of the study programme.¹¹ Additionally, a large part of students who do not drop out of their studies but fall behind and extend the duration of their studies do so based on difficulties

¹⁰ Euroguidance (2012). The Agency for Mobility and European Union Programmes. <http://www.mobilnost.hr/hr/sadrzaj/programi/obrazovanje-i-osposobljavanje/programi-mreze-inicijative-u-podrucju-obrazovanja-i-osposobljavanja/euroguidance/>

¹¹ Farnell, T., Doolan, K., Matković, T. and Cvitan, M. (2014). Socijalna uključenost visokog obrazovanja u Hrvatskoj: analiza stanja. [Social Inclusiveness of Higher Education in Croatia: Situation Analysis]. Zagreb: Institute for the Development of Education. Available at: http://www.iro.hr/userdocs/File/Publikacije/Socijalna_ukljucivost_visokog_obrazovanja.pdf

encountered during their first year.¹² In this context, the National Plan proposes measures (3.1) such as introducing competency compensation programmes, improving the adjustment system for students with disabilities, auditing study programmes and distributing the study load equally through the years of the study programme. Apart from Objective 6 of the Strategy's higher education section, these measures are also based on activities from Objective 1.2 ("Adapt the content of study programmes according to clearly defined learning outcomes").

The system of student counselling is also insufficiently developed, which represents a significant barrier for the successful studies of students from vulnerable groups¹³ (3.2). At higher education institutions where such a system does exist, it still usually exists exclusively in the form of psychological counselling. It is therefore necessary to develop and expand the existing counselling system so that it includes other types of support for students (directed towards career development, finances, academic development and support for students with disabilities).

Another feature of the higher education system that negatively impacts all students and is especially problematic for members of vulnerable groups is the insufficient flexibility of study programmes (3.3). In this sense, the validation of informal and non-formal learning could significantly help access and successful completion of studies, particularly for those who were previously employed or acquired practical experience in other ways before enrolling in a study programme (or during the course of their studies). The conceptual basis for such a system would be a national strategic document for the development of recognition of prior learning, which is also specified in Overall Objective 2 of the Strategy ("Develop processes and a system of recognition of knowledge and skills acquired through non-formal or informal learning"). A second way of making study programmes more flexible is through applied teaching methods and knowledge assessment methods. It is possible to use tools for distance learning in order to increase availability for students, particularly those whose permanent physical attendance is either difficult or impossible due to their life circumstances. This measure also relies upon Objective 5.2 of the Strategy ("Improve information and communication infrastructure").

Students who are members of vulnerable groups also need more developed learning support (3.4). The proposed measures in this domain are the wider availability of learning resources, the adjustment of teaching materials and the establishment and development of a student mentoring system. The proposed measures are based on Measure 1.2.3 of Objective 1.2 of the Strategy ("Design and introduce a mentoring system into all higher education institutions").

Having adequately qualified and trained teaching and non-teaching staff at higher education institutions is a precondition for the availability and accessibility of higher education for vulnerable groups (3.5). Currently, even lecturers who have completed formal education in this area (teacher training programmes) have not completed substantial training for working with vulnerable groups of students through such study programmes. The proposed measures are an audit of teacher training programmes and the establishment of continuous professional development programmes for working with vulnerable groups. These measures are also based on Objective 3 of the Strategy ("Ensure a high-quality personnel structure at higher education institutions as the basis for the improvement of higher education quality").

Finally, from the perspective of the social dimension of higher education, the division of the higher education system into full-time and part-time study programmes (i.e. students) is also problematic (3.6). Part-time students are more likely to belong to vulnerable groups, while at the same time they have a less or no access to student support instruments.¹⁴ The situation of part-time students is also made

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Orr, D. and Szabo, M. (2015). *Peer Learning for the Social Dimension: Country Review in Croatia – Final Report* (http://www.pl4sd.eu/images/Country_Reviews/CR_Final_Report_Croatia.pdf)

¹⁴ Šćukanec, N., Sinković, M., Bilić, R., Doolan, K. and Cvitan, M. (2016). *Socijalni i ekonomski uvjeti studentskog života u Hrvatskoj: nacionalno izvješće istraživanja EUROSTUDENT V za Hrvatsku za 2014. [Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Croatia: National EUROSTUDENT V Report for Croatia 2014]*. Zagreb: Ministry of Science, Education and Sports of the Republic of Croatia.

difficult by the fact that all of them pay tuition fees, and most of them are not in full-time employment. The measures proposed in the National Plan for improving the position of part-time students relate to limiting the amount of tuition fees for part-time students, the legal regulation of part-time student rights and enabling a proportion of part-time students to access student financial support. These measures are based on Objective 2.8 of the Strategy (“Redefine the model of part-time studies”).

OBJECTIVE 4: INCREASE BOTH THE COMPLETION RATE OF UNDER-REPRESENTED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS AND THEIR EMPLOYMENT RATE AFTER GRADUATION

The youth unemployment rate in Croatia is among the highest in the EU, which in the long term has exceptionally negative consequences for the economy and the society, in addition to causing numerous personal problems. According to Eurostat,¹⁵ the survey rate of youth unemployment in Greece and Spain in 2016 was the highest in the EU, while that year Croatia ranked as high as fourth place within the European Union, with a rate of 31.1% (compared to an EU average of 18.7%). At the EU level, as well as in Croatia, the youth unemployment rate is falling, but it still remains very high in Croatia. In 2015, the average unemployment rate of young people between 15 and 24 years of age in the EU was 20.3%, compared to 22.2% from the previous year. The youth unemployment rate in Croatia in 2015 was 42.3%.

In 2012, the European Commission, faced with a high and ever-increasing youth unemployment rate, adopted a series of measures and initiatives in order to facilitate the access of youth to the labour market. In December 2012, the European Commission also proposed adopting the Employment Package, which consisted of a string of proposals including:¹⁶

- every young person under the age of 25 should receive a high-quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of completing formal education or terminating employment (the Youth Guarantee);¹⁷
- consulting European social partners regarding a quality framework for traineeships, which would enable youth to acquire high-quality work experience under safe conditions;
- establishing a European Alliance for Apprenticeships with the aim to improve the quality and offer of available apprenticeships and defining the ways to decrease barriers to youth mobility.

In the context of employment, this National Plan proposes the following measures: the improvement of collaboration between higher education institutions and employers in securing student work placements (4.1); the evaluation of higher education institutions from the position of supporting early career development for graduates based on a unique maturity model (4.3); the inclusion of higher education institutions into special programmes for supporting employment through EU funding (4.4); the monitoring and rewarding of higher education institutions’ contribution to graduate employment through funding agreements (4.5); and the monitoring of graduates employment within the first four months after graduation (4.6). Some of these objectives are based on the Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (Official Gazette No. 124/14), whose introduction contains the following: *“...a lack of student training and field-based teaching has been observed in some study programmes. For many study programmes, the high-quality implementation of internships is a prerequisite for acquiring competences and it is therefore also a prerequisite for the enhanced employability of graduates, that is, to ensure they are better prepared to meet the demands of their future employers. It is therefore necessary to establish, within the framework of sectoral interest networks (see measure 4.2.4), appropriate models for organising this practical aspect of study programmes.”*

Regarding completion rates in higher education, the Strategy for Education, Science and Technology¹⁸

¹⁵ Eurostat Employment Statistics: [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Youth_unemployment_figures_2007-2016_\(%25\)_T1.png#filehistory](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Youth_unemployment_figures_2007-2016_(%25)_T1.png#filehistory)

¹⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Employment_statistics/hr&oldid=202404

¹⁷ Youth Guarantee. Ministry of Labour and Pension System (2014). <http://www.gzm.hr/>

¹⁸ <http://novebojeznanja.hr/UserDocImages//datoteke/3.1.pdf>

contains the following in the introduction to the higher education section: “... it is also necessary to improve the efficiency of the system, leading to shorter duration of studies and increased completion rates. This can only be achieved through interconnected efforts and initiatives across all levels focused on achieving positive shifts in the higher education system, which will in turn result in positive trends in Croatian society.” It continues (p. 4): “Improved efficiency implies shortening the duration of studies, increasing completion rates, decreasing enrolment quotas for study programmes educating a large number of students in fields with few employment opportunities, increasing enrolment quotas for study programmes for shortage occupations, enhancing employability after acquiring a bachelor’s degree and increasing the quality of higher education in every field.” In relation to this, a separate measure (1.2.6) is defined to encourage the completion of study programmes within their prescribed duration, while simultaneously ensuring the quality and availability of study programmes and the achievement of learning outcomes. This measure should also be included among objectives defined in funding agreements.

In order to provide support for students from vulnerable groups for their successful completion of the study programme they enrolled in, the National Plan proposes the enhancement of student support centres (4.2).

OBJECTIVE 5: IMPROVE THE STUDENT FINANCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR MEMBERS OF UNDER-REPRESENTED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS¹⁹

The elaboration of this objective was guided by the Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (Official Gazette No. 124/14), in the section that refers to higher education development. This primarily refers to two strategic objectives defined for higher education: (a) develop an efficient higher education funding system that stimulates development (Objective 4) and (b) improve the student financial support system, with a special emphasis on the social dimension of higher education (Objective 6). The proposals for the sub-objectives, activities and indicators are mostly based on research, findings and recommendations developed in various international projects for higher education development financed through EU funds.

A project entitled “ACCESS: Towards Equitable and Transparent Access to Higher Education in Croatia” (funded through the TEMPUS programme) served as the basis for drafting the recommendations for the reform of the system for funding public higher education institutions and the student financial support system that are presented in the National Plan. This project was the first to analyse the impact of funding policies in Croatia and Europe on the social dimension of higher education. The project, managed by the Institute for the Development of Education (IDE) from 2010 to 2013, involved a consortium that included all Croatian higher education institutions and the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Croatia. The recommendations that are presented in this section of the National Plan are based on comparative analyses of higher education institutions funding policies and student financial support systems in six European countries. All the information about the project, along with reports on the conducted research and proposals, is available on the website www.iro.hr and in the list of references.

In addition, a project entitled “PL4SD: Peer Learning for the Social Dimension”, managed by the Institute of Advanced Studies in Vienna from 2012 to 2015, aimed to increase transparency and present systemic and comprehensive approaches to activities for improving the social dimension implemented by members of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). In drafting the proposals of the National Plan, this project’s database was consulted since it collected a large number of measures for enhancing the social dimension in member countries of the EHEA. The database is available on the project website www.pl4sd.eu. Moreover, the project conducted an external independent evaluation (country review) of policies and measures in Croatia (as a member of the EHEA) to improve the social dimension, and those reports were also consulted for drafting the National Plan.

Finally, we used the data and results of the Eurostudent survey. In order for policies for enhancing the

¹⁹ A list of references on which the proposed measures are based are included at the end of the document.

social dimension of higher education to be evidence-based, the Eurostudent international survey has been launched and conducted in 30 out of 47 member countries of the EHEA. The objective of the survey is to collect data on the demographic profile of the student body, the socioeconomic status of students, students' expenses throughout their studies, sources of funding, student satisfaction regarding various aspects of their studies, working while studying and students' experience and plans regarding international mobility. Croatia participated in the Eurostudent survey for the first time in 2010, during its fourth cycle, and it subsequently participated in the fifth research cycle (Eurostudent V) that was conducted in Croatia in 2014.

By examining the main findings of the above-mentioned projects, the following conclusions were reached regarding student financial support from public sources for under-represented and vulnerable groups. It is important to primarily provide direct financial support in the form of grants, to provide support primarily according to needs-based criteria and to adjust the monthly grant amount to the actual study costs of vulnerable groups. Such measures would decrease the need of these students for paid work, which would enable them to dedicate more time to their study obligations. It is also necessary to consider the possibility of increasing the total number of available publicly-funded student grants in order to increase the overall proportion of grant-receiving students. In order to accomplish this, it is necessary to review whether the ratio of public investments into indirect forms of student financial support through subsidies (which are universally available to all full-time students) and through direct forms of student financial support through grants (which should be intended for those in need) is in accordance with the principle of equity.

We also believe it is important to highlight the sub-objective that refers to an increase of student dormitory accommodation availability under favourable financial conditions. The aim of this measure is to gradually get closer to the group of Eurostudent countries in which more than one quarter of students live in student dormitories (Slovenia with 27%, the Netherlands with 29%, Finland with 32% and Slovakia with 36%). Needs-based criteria should be the main basis for accessing accommodation in student dormitories.

In order to ensure that a larger proportion of students receive grants (compared to the current rate of 23% [Šćukanec et al., 2016.]), we propose to develop mechanisms that would encourage companies, foundations and civil society organisations to a more active involvement in awarding student grants. According to the Eurostudent V findings, the grants awarded by companies, foundations or civil society organisations in Croatia cover the smallest percentage (8%) of the observed grant sources.

OBJECTIVE 6: INCLUDE STANDARDS RELATED TO ENHANCING THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION INTO THE QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

Quality assurance can be regarded as a support mechanism for higher education institutions in their adjustment to new environments and expectations of society and in ensuring that student qualifications and study experiences remain priorities of institutional missions. The external evaluation of higher education institutions is implemented in Croatia in accordance with the European Standards and Guidelines from 2015,²⁰ which have been restructured with an emphasis on the student as the central focus of higher education. Special attention is therefore given within quality assurance to support, resources, the teaching process and to learning adapted to student needs and abilities.

In the context of the strategic orientation of the Republic of Croatia and the European framework as presented in this National Plan, the quality assurance system of higher education institutions should also encompass processes that lead to increased availability and easier progression through higher education for vulnerable and under-represented student groups. In this context, the National Plan proposes to integrate indicators related to the social dimension of higher education into internal quality assurance

²⁰ The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education*, ESG 2015.

systems (6.2), as well as into the external evaluation of higher education institutions (6.3). Finally, in order to improve the management processes and the adoption of policies for increased availability of higher education (6.1), institutional strategic documents should be drafted to improve the accessibility of higher education to vulnerable and under-represented groups and the impact of these strategies should be assessed.

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List of abbreviations

AMEUP	Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes
ASHE	Agency for Science and Higher Education
CEEPUS	Central European Exchange Programme for University Studies
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
CCE	Croatian Chamber of Economy
CROQF	Croatian Qualifications Framework
CSC	Croatian Student Council
CEA	Croatian Employers' Association
CES	Croatian Employment Service
IT	Information Technology
MFIN	Ministry of Finance
MLPS	Ministry of Labour and Pension System
MI	Ministry of the Interior
MSE	Ministry of Science and Education
MSES	Ministry of Science, Education and Sports
NCEEE	National Centre for External Evaluation of Education
ES	Elementary schools
HS	High schools
STEM	Science, technology, engineering and mathematics
HEI	Higher education institutions
VU	Visoka učilišta

National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia (2019-2021)

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UNDER-REPRESENTED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

The document was prepared by the National Group for Enhancing the Social
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Introduction

On 17 October 2014, the Croatian Parliament adopted the Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (Official Gazette No. 124/14). In the strategy, the chapter on higher education lists several tasks aimed at enhancing the social dimension of higher education in Croatia. One of these tasks (measure 6.2.2) refers to the identification of under-represented and/or vulnerable groups in higher education and the factors contributing to the lower inclusion of students from these groups in higher education.

Based on empirical data and insights, this document lists under-represented and/or vulnerable groups in higher education in Croatia and briefly outlines the factors contributing to their under-representation and/or vulnerability. Under-representation in higher education is defined as a lower representation of a certain group of students in the higher education system compared to population-level data or to the situation in other European countries. The following under-represented groups have been identified: students whose parents have a lower level of education, female students in technical fields and male students in the humanities, mature students, students with children and Roma students. Vulnerable groups of students include those with a higher risk of exposure to difficulties in the form of academic or social integration and students who have fewer opportunities for some aspects of studying such as international mobility. The following vulnerable groups have been identified: mature students, students with disabilities, students with children, Roma students, students from lower-income families, students who have completed vocational education, students under a significant strain from working while studying, students commuting to their place of study, LGBT students, students from alternative care systems, homeless students, students from rural areas, small towns and islands, as well as refugees and asylum seekers.

Although there are indications for all the groups listed in the document that they are under-represented and/or vulnerable in higher education, reliable data are only available for some of them. Furthermore, even though the document is structured according to particular characteristics of vulnerability (e.g. students whose parents have a lower level of education or mature students), it is also important to take their cumulative effect into account (e.g. mature students whose parents have a lower level of education). In addition to the data on individual characteristics of vulnerability, two institutional aspects of vulnerability are mentioned at the end of the document. More specifically, part-time and professional studies are often attended by vulnerable groups of students.

Considering that the Eurostudent survey is the only recent survey conducted on a representative sample of students in Croatia focusing on social and economic conditions of student life, most of the data in the document come from that source (Šćukanec et al., 2016). However, in addition to the Eurostudent data, other research and inquiry findings relevant to identifying vulnerable groups in Croatian higher education are mentioned although the document is by no means a comprehensive overview of the relevant literature. The document is conceived as a basis for reflection on interventions in the higher education system in Croatia aimed at supporting students of under-represented and/or vulnerable groups in instances where sufficient data is available, or as a foundation for identifying research that should be conducted in order to get a more complete picture of the challenge of ensuring the social dimension in Croatia.

About the social dimension of higher education

Within the context of the Bologna Process, the social dimension has been mentioned in the ministerial communiqués since 2001. A complete and comprehensive definition of social dimension was agreed upon in London in 2007. According to the definition, ensuring the social dimension means that “the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations” while emphasising “the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background” (London Communiqué, 2007). The latest Yerevan Ministerial Communiqué (May 2015) also highlights the importance of enhancing the social dimension, including gender balance in higher education and improving access to higher education, successful completion and opportunities for participation in international mobility programmes for students from vulnerable groups. Within the context of the Yerevan Communiqué, ministers of higher education of the countries participating in the Bologna Process have adopted the Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the European Higher Education Area by 2020. Within the framework of the Strategy, European ministers of higher education committed themselves to the development of effective public policies aimed at ensuring greater access to quality higher education, especially for students from under-represented and socially vulnerable groups.

Under-represented and vulnerable groups in higher education in Croatia

STUDENTS WHOSE PARENTS HAVE A LOWER LEVEL OF EDUCATION

People from more educated families have a better chance of accessing higher education. According to the Eurostudent data, a total of 46% of students come from a family in which at least one parent has a higher education qualification, 56% from a family in which at least one parent completed secondary school, and only 3% from a family in which parents only completed primary school (Šćukanec et al., 2016). These percentages do not correspond to the distribution of the attained levels of education in the population. If we look at the population of men and women between the age of 40 and 60, the age group of the majority of parents of the students surveyed, there are significantly less fathers and mothers with a lower level of education among the student population than there are in the reference population.¹ In the Eurostudent survey sample (Šćukanec et al., 2016) 5.1% of students have a father with the lowest level of education, whereas in the total population of men between the age of 40 and 60, 18.5% of them have only completed primary school. This indicates that there is a significant under-representation of students in higher education in Croatia whose fathers have only attained the lowest level of education. The difference is smaller in the representation of fathers with secondary education given that 59% of them are present in the sample and 64% in the total population. However, the sample includes 34% of fathers who have a higher education degree, whereas 17% of men between the age of 40 and 60 in the total population have the same level of education. This indicates that there is a significant over-representation of students in higher education in Croatia whose fathers have higher education. Similar findings are obtained when analysing the level of education of mothers. There is more pronounced under-representation of students whose mothers have the lowest level of education in comparison to data pertaining to the students' fathers: the Eurostudent survey sample (Šćukanec et al., 2016) includes 9% of students whose mothers have the lowest level of education, while they make up 28% of the total population of women between the age of 40 and 60. Students whose mothers have a higher education qualification are over-represented – they make up 31% of

¹ The 2011 Census data were used as reference data.

the sample in contrast to 18% of the total population.

There are multiple explanations for these findings – on average, pupils from families with less educated parents have poorer educational achievements at the primary and secondary school level (e.g. Burušić, Babarović and Marković, 2010; Jokić and Ristić Dedić, 2010; Gregurović and Kuti, 2009) and they enrol in vocational schools more often, especially three-year vocational schools, whereby taking supplemental examinations as well as the State Matura examination (state-level secondary school leaving examination) makes it difficult for them to continue their education (Matković et al., 2014). Moreover, insufficient education counselling has been identified as well (Košutić et al., 2015).

Parental level of education is also connected to other aspects of higher education. Students with at least one highly-educated parent are significantly more inclined to spend some time studying abroad (41%) than students whose parents only have a secondary school qualification (32%) or a primary school qualification (15%) (Šćukanec et al., 2016). Furthermore, up to 60% of students of highly-educated parents intend to continue studying at the graduate level in contrast to 51% of students whose parents have a secondary school qualification, and 27% of students whose parents only have a primary school qualification (Šćukanec et al., 2016). The correlation between the income structure of students and the level of education of their parents probably contributes to these findings.²

According to population data collected from higher education application forms by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, no significant differences were observed in study duration patterns (or the frequency of slower study progression) with regards to parental level of education among students of any year of study in the academic year 2010/2011 (Farnell et al., 2014).

STUDENTS FROM LOWER-INCOME FAMILIES

Although there are no data that could be used to identify the under-representation of people of from lower-income families in higher education, the studies available show that lower economic status influences the decision not to continue education on a higher education level (Košutić et al., 2015). According to data by Košutić et al. (2015), secondary school pupils who are planning to study or who do not yet know if they are going to study differ according to their parents' wealth: students who are planning to study are the wealthiest. A third of the students who stated in the aforementioned study that they are not going to continue their education selected the lack of financial resources as one of the reasons.

As far as mobility plans are concerned, additional financial expenses required to study abroad were perceived as the biggest obstacle to studying abroad (Šćukanec et al., 2016). According to Drusany et al. (2012), due to the lack of financial resources, students rarely decide to attend summer schools and to participate in other extracurricular activities that put a financial strain on the student.

Erasmus+ international mobility programme offers the possibility to receive increased financial support to students from families of lower socioeconomic status. Based on the data from the Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes, approximately 20% of Croatian students participating in the Erasmus+ programme received increased financial support. This financial support cannot be received within other mobility programmes such as CEEPUS or bilateral grants.

Since having a permanent job has been identified as a risk factor for study success (Doolan, 2010), it is im-

² Income structure is also related to the level of education of the parents of the students. The average monthly income from the family is HRK 939.00 (Šćukanec et al., 2016). Students with at least one highly-educated parent have an above-average income from the family (an average of HRK 1,042.00 per month). On the other hand, students whose parents have only completed primary school cannot rely as frequently on the income from their family (an average of HRK 712.00 per month) and their savings. For this reason, these students are more likely to have a permanent job in order to cover most of their study costs. Students whose parents completed primary and secondary school are significantly more likely to describe their financial predicaments as very serious or serious (53% of students whose parents have a primary school degree and 44% of students whose parents have a secondary school degree) in contrast to students whose parents have a higher education (29% of them describe their predicaments as very serious or serious).

portant to note that students of lower economic status are more likely to have a permanent job (Šćukanec et al., 2016).

FEMALE STUDENTS IN TECHNICAL FIELDS, MALE STUDENTS IN THE HUMANITIES

If we take a look at the structure of the student body based on gender, we can observe that female and male students are equally represented although female students make up a somewhat larger proportion (56%) of the student body (Šćukanec et al., 2016). However, there are noticeable differences in the representation of male and female students in fields of study. While male students form a significant majority in technical sciences (70%), female students form a significant majority in the humanities and social sciences (74%) and study programmes in the field of medicine and health (71%) (Šćukanec et al., 2016). Jokić and Ristić-Dedić report similar findings (2014). This difference is further illustrated by the representation of female and male graduates in specific study programmes: in 2014 women made up 19.48% of the total number of graduates from computing study programmes, 32.1% from architecture and civil engineering study programmes, whereas women made up 97.01% of graduates from teacher training programmes and 95.29% from social work study programmes (Women and Men in Croatia, 2015). When it comes to the IT sector, women are severely under-represented both in Croatia and in the world (Divjak, Ostroški and Vidaček, 2010).

According to Jugović (2015), gender stereotypes about occupations and fields of study constitute an important factor for choosing various fields of study: the belief that your own gender group is not sufficiently talented for a particular occupation and field of study is associated with a lower probability of choosing that particular study programme.

MATURE STUDENTS

Most students enrol in higher education for the first time at the age of 18 (51%), or at the age of 19 (36%), while only 8% of students enrol in higher education for the first time after the age of 21 (Šćukanec et al., 2016). By comparing the data for Croatia and the data for other EU countries, we are able to draw conclusions concerning the under-representation of mature students in Croatian higher education. According to Hauschildt et al. (2015), based on the Eurostudent comparative data, 21% of students are 25 or older, whereas, for instance, this proportion amounts to 58% in Finland, 53% in Sweden, 52% in Norway, 46% in Austria and 44% in Switzerland. Out of 29 countries, Croatia is placed 17th with respect to the proportion of students older than 25.

What are the possible reasons for the low representation of mature students in Croatian higher education? One of the possible reasons is financial difficulties: over a third of students (37%) that participated in the Eurostudent survey describe their financial difficulties as very serious or serious. Mature students are particularly prominent among them (Šćukanec et al., 2016). A total of 51% of students who enrolled in higher education at the age of 21 or older describe their financial difficulties as very serious or serious, while only 36% of the students who enrolled in higher education when they were younger than 21 feel the same (Šćukanec et al., 2016). This is the group that can rely on their parents' financial support to a lesser extent than their younger colleagues. The challenge of studying while working may be an additional reason to this – as a group, students who started studying after the age of 21 are among the most represented in relation to having a permanent job. A total of 47% of the students who enrolled in their studies after the age of 21 work full-time (35 hours a week or more), whereas the same applies to only 10% of the students who enrolled in their studies before the age of 21 (Šćukanec et al., 2016). The aforementioned group rarely receives a grant that could help reduce the workload: slightly under a quarter (23%) of the students that participated in the Eurostudent survey mentioned grants as a source of income. The average amount of the grant was HRK 949 a month. An extremely high number of students that started studying at the age of 21 and older do not receive grants (93%). The fact that this group of students needs to pass the State Matura examination in order to enrol in higher education may be an aggravating circumstance

because some of them completed their secondary school education before the introduction of the State Matura examination.

Students who enrol in higher education at the age of 21 or older do not plan on continuing their education at the graduate level as frequently as their younger counterparts do (31% versus 56%) (Šćukanec et al., 2016). There are also some indications that mature students are more likely not to complete the first year of study (Mihaljević Kosor, 2010) and that they have more difficulty integrating socially during their studies (Doolan et al., 2014).

STUDENTS WITH CHILDREN

A total of 3% of students have children (Šćukanec et al., 2016). They are an under-represented group if we compare this proportion with those from other European countries. According to Hauschildt et al. (2015), based on the Eurostudent comparative data, out of 29 countries, Croatia is placed 25th with respect to the proportion of students who have children (in Norway, for instance, 25% of students have children, in Sweden 21%; this is also associated with a larger proportion of mature students in these countries).

What makes this group vulnerable? According to the statements of students, the average cost per term for students in Croatia is HRK 15,417.00, which includes both living and study costs. Students with children belong to the group of students with the highest expenses. Their average total cost per term is HRK 33,204.00, which means that their average expenses per term are two times bigger than those of other students (HRK 14,586.00). More than a third of students (37%) in Croatia describe their financial difficulties as very serious or serious, and among them students with children are a particularly prominent group (Šćukanec et al., 2016). Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that most students who are parents (65%) work full-time or part-time (Šćukanec et al., 2016).

Almost a quarter (23%) of Croatian students listed grants as their source of income, averaging HRK 949.00 a month. An extremely high proportion (93%) of students who have children do not receive a grant.

There is an extremely low proportion (14%) of students with children who intend to continue studying at the graduate level. As expected, up to 90% of students with children do not plan on studying abroad.

A total of 15% of all students in Croatia temporarily interrupt their studies for at least a year. Students with children interrupt their studies more often than average (22%) and they claim that they have more difficulty studying than other students do: they assess more negatively their time available for studying (Doolan et al., 2014).

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

In accordance with Article 3 of the Ordinance amending the Ordinance on organisation and functioning of the Office for students with disabilities of the University of Zagreb from 2013,³ students with disabilities are “... all students who experience permanent, occasional, or temporary difficulties in their day-to-day academic activities due to illness, impairment or other conditions irrespective of the decision on the determined percentage of physical impairment (students with visual and hearing impairment, motor disorders, chronic illnesses, mental illnesses and disorders, and specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, and ADHD, and other health conditions and difficulties that can have an impact on studying)”. Although some institutions of higher education keep a record of students with disabilities who are recipients of some kind of support, there are no reliable data on the number of students with disabilities who are enrolled at Croatian higher education institutions. According to the records of institutional support services for students with disabilities, a total of 571 students with disabilities are recipients of some kind of support in the higher education

3 <http://www.unizg.hr/uredssi/index.php/lang-hr/dokumenti>

system. Ombudswoman for Persons with Disabilities⁴ reports that there are 364 students with disabilities in Croatia, of whom 329 are full-time students.

Although most of the students who participated in the Eurostudent survey state that they do not experience any difficulties that affect the duration of their studies, 14% of the students self-assessed that they suffer from some kind of health difficulty, namely: chronic illnesses (5%), visual or hearing impairments (5%), learning difficulties (3%), long-term physical or health problems (3%), mental disorders (2%), and mobility difficulties (1%) (Šćukanec et al., 2016).

A total of 58% of students who claim to have health difficulties state that they do not need any kind of support. Over a quarter of students (27%) consider that the support that is provided to them is of extremely low quality. Only 1% of them stated that the support is of excellent quality. This highlights the shortcomings in the quality of the support for students with disabilities, meaning that it is not entirely tailored to the specific needs and specific circumstances that these students face during their studies (Šćukanec et al., 2016).

The study conducted as a part of the IPA project “Multi-Dimensional Analysis of Social Inclusion of Children and Students with Disabilities in the Educational Process”⁵ showed that students differ in assessing their satisfaction with the support system based on their type of impairment – students with hearing impairment are significantly less satisfied with the support system than any other previously mentioned group of students, with the exception of students with the so-called invisible disabilities, whereas the most satisfied students are students with motor disorders who use a wheelchair (Kiš-Glavaš, 2014). The latter must be the result of the students having a positive perception of the substantial improvement of spatial accessibility in general, and of the accessibility of higher education institutions in particular (Bačani et al., 2015).

On a scale from one (“not satisfied at all”) to five (“very satisfied”), the average rating of satisfaction of Croatian students with the quality of study programmes, organisation of study programmes and their schedule, the relationship of the administrative staff towards students and the level of equipment of the space is around three (3). Students suffering from health difficulties⁶ express more dissatisfaction with specific aspects, especially concerning the organisation of the study programme and the lecture schedule (2.8) and the possibility of choosing courses (2.6).

A total of 15% of all students in Croatia temporarily interrupt their studies for at least a year. Students with physical disabilities, mental disabilities or learning disorders are slightly more likely to interrupt their studies (16%) (Šćukanec et al., 2016). Drusany et al. (2012) have also identified disability as one of the factors interfering with studying.

Due to different health conditions or acute illnesses, students are faced with various obstacles: some of them have to undergo physical therapy, some of them have difficulty sitting in lectures for the whole day, some of them need visual magnifiers for textual materials, while some find it difficult to reach dislocated faculty buildings (Doolan et al., 2014).

There are no reliable data in Croatia on the participation of persons with disabilities in the international mobility. According to the available data from the Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes, two students with disabilities took part in the Erasmus exchange programme in 2014, while five of them participated in 2015. However, the Agency does not have the data on the participation of students with disabilities among outgoing students if they did not ask for additional financial support.

4 <http://www.posi.hr/>

5 <http://dodir.hr/ipa/>

6 The category of students with disabilities consists of students who stated that they suffer from one or more of the listed disabilities: chronic illness, visual or hearing impairment, learning disorders, mental disorders, mobility difficulties, other long-term physical and/or health difficulties.

STUDENTS WHO HAVE COMPLETED VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Pupils of three-year vocational schools who wish to enrol in higher education face significant difficulties. According to Baranović (2015), 98.5% of grammar school pupils and 75% of four-year vocational school pupils intend to go to university, whereas only 16.5% of three-year vocational school pupils intend to do the same. According to Matković et al. (2014), the obligation to get a four-year vocational qualification and to take the State Matura examination presents an obstacle to pupils from three-year vocational schools who wish to enrol in higher education.

The type of the secondary school completed is also associated with the plans for participating in the international student mobility – students who have completed grammar school are significantly more inclined to spend a certain amount of time studying abroad (43%) than those who have completed a vocational school (27%) (Šćukanec et al., 2016).

There are indications that students who have completed vocational education have more difficulty passing their first year examinations (Mihaljević Kosor, 2010; Doolan, 2010). According to Doolan (2010), students who previously completed certain vocational schools express dissatisfaction with how they had been prepared for their studies while in secondary school both in respect to content (curriculum) and in respect to work habits.

STUDENTS WHO WORK WHILE STUDYING

In some cases, the necessity to work dictates the type of the study programme chosen by students. Therefore, it is not uncommon that those who have to work opt for a study programme that is not time consuming because it allows them to study while working (Doolan et al., 2014).

According to the Eurostudent data (Šćukanec et al., 2016), 44% of students had a full-time or part-time job during the term in which the study was conducted. Students whose parents do not have higher education, students who started studying after the age of 21 and student who are parents are over-represented in relation to having a permanent job (Šćukanec et al., 2016).

In the study by Drusany et al. (2012), 18.8% of students stated that their job impedes their studying, ranging from “sometimes” to “extremely”.

Students who have a permanent job are more likely to assess the intensity of study obligations to be lower than students who do not have a job (Šćukanec et al., 2016).

The obligation to attend classes makes it difficult for them to be regular students (Doolan et al., 2014). In particular, coordinating their work and study obligations poses the biggest challenge to these students.

STUDENTS WHO COMMUTE TO THEIR PLACE OF STUDY

According to the Eurostudent data (Šćukanec et al., 2016), 13% of students commute to class to another county. While the distance from their home in one county to their place of study in another county is negligible for some students, for others it involves a longer journey and higher costs.

According to Doolan et al. (2014), students commuting to their place of study from another county are a vulnerable group because they cannot attend all of the lectures due to travel expenses and irregular public transport services. Students living outside of the county where they study on average describe their financial difficulties as difficult in contrast to those living in the county where they study (Šćukanec et al., 2016). Because of the time spent on commuting, these students also have less time to study (Doolan et al., 2014).

STUDENTS WHO ARE CHILDREN OF CROATIAN HOMELAND WAR VETERANS

The Strategy for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion in the Republic of Croatia (2014-2020) identified some Croatian Homeland War veterans and some war casualties and members of their families as a special category of citizens who are faced with problems such as poverty, disability, unemployment, illness, unresolved housing issues, difficult social contacts and associations. Some children of Croatian Homeland War veterans are growing up and being educated in difficult living conditions, which is reflected in their academic achievement and their later access to higher education.

Since the Homeland War, incentive measures for enrolment in higher education have been implemented in the name of the most vulnerable groups of children of Croatian Homeland War veterans (children of deceased, captive or missing Croatian Homeland War veterans, and children of 100% Croatian Homeland War invalids of the first category) either by law or by the Agreement on Incentive Measures for Enrolment in Higher Education Institutions, which was signed by the ministries competent for education and Homeland War veterans and by the Rector's Conference of the Republic of Croatia in 2007.

According to the most recent data, there are 7,499 children of deceased, captive or missing Croatian Homeland War veterans in total in the records from the Ministry of Croatian Veterans. Out of those 7,499 children, 1,750 of them are currently studying full-time with 726 of them studying at higher education institutions. A total of 302 children of deceased Croatian Homeland War veterans under the age of 19 are yet to access higher education. According to the Ministry of Croatian Veterans, the total number of children of Croatian Homeland War veterans is a lot higher and data are still not systematically collected for the group. Representatives of the Ministry of Croatian Veterans state that the course of life and studying for the children of Croatian Homeland War veterans, who were primarily or secondarily traumatised by war events and/or suffering of their parents, has been changed in relation to the planned course that had existed in times of peace. On the other hand, early loss and growing up without one or even both parents could have significantly impacted the academic achievement of children of deceased, captive or missing Croatian Homeland War veterans, which could in effect result in their unequal position in relation to others when it comes to access to higher education. According to the study by Kovač (2015), whose aim was to measure the effects of losing a parent in war-time on child development, especially on the quality of education, it was shown that loss of a parent has a long-term negative effect on their achievement in school. The longer the child grew up without a parent, the more adverse the effects are. In addition, the psychological consequences of losing a parent at an early age are more pronounced as the child gets older.

ROMA STUDENTS

There are no data available on the systematic monitoring of the representation of members of national minorities at the national level. Relevant comprehensive studies are non-existent as well. However, there are indications that members of the Roma minority are under-represented. According to the data from the former Ministry of Science, Education and Sport for the academic year 2014/2015, only seven students who were enrolled declared themselves as members of the Roma minority.

Obstacles to pursuing higher education occur at the lower levels of education. Members of the Roma minority are a vulnerable group in relation to completing primary school (Novak, 2008), while those who enrol in secondary school often enrol in three-year vocational schools, which in itself is an obstacle to pursuing higher education (Baranović, 2009). In addition, according to Baranović (2009), a relatively small number of survey participants of the Roma minority have aspirations to enrol in higher education.

LGBT STUDENTS

In the study performed in the project "E-Quality: Connecting quality and social inclusion in higher education in Croatia", students declared that LGBT students are a potentially vulnerable group of students at higher education institutions in Croatia when it comes to social integration. However, in relation to this

particular group in Croatia there is still no systematic data collection, which results in an inadequate level of knowledge on the subject. The results of a study on secondary school pupils in Croatia (Jugović and Bezinović, 2015) demonstrate that LGBT pupils are more frequently exposed to relational and physical violence than their heterosexual peers. Such data have not yet been collected for the population of higher education students.

STUDENTS FROM ALTERNATIVE CARE SYSTEMS

According to the “Korak u život” association, around 200 children without appropriate parental care from children’s homes and foster families complete secondary school every year in Croatia, with part of them expressing a wish to continue their education. According to the brochure Guidelines for fulfilling the needs of the youth from alternative care systems (Šimić, Kusturin and Zenko, 2011), around 172 young people aged 18 to 21 leave alternative care systems every year. The encounters with young people from alternative care systems, which form one of the cornerstones of the brochure, have provided the following insights that explain the choices of these young people in education: they have declared that they needed to enrol in a secondary school that would enable them to find a job immediately after completing secondary school, which negatively affected their chances of pursuing higher education; they have also declared that a major obstacle to continuing with their education is a lack of financial means (money for books, tuition fees, tutorials) and that they are not sufficiently informed about potential scholarships. The brochure also states that young people from alternative care systems who decide to continue with their education a few years after completing secondary school encounter problems such as the inability to obtain accommodation at student dormitories and the inability to be eligible for certain scholarships. It is also stated that working while studying because of financial necessity negatively affects their studies.

HOMELESS STUDENTS AND STUDENTS AT RISK OF BECOMING HOMELESS

According to the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA), the young homeless are people aged 13 to 24 who live separately from their parents and do not have a permanent place of residence nor a source of financial income. FEANTSA states that the number of the young homeless may increase in most European countries due to the global economic crisis.

According to the information from the Ombudsman’s office, collected from interviews with the representatives of the Croatian Network for the Homeless, in 2015 and 2016 there have been cases of young people (among them several higher education students) seeking help from regional homeless centres because of losing their permanent place of residence due to extraordinary life circumstances.

However, in relation to this particular group of higher education students in Croatia there is still no systematic data collection, and consequently no adequate insight into the subject.

STUDENTS FROM RURAL AREAS, SMALL TOWNS AND ISLANDS

There are no studies on the representation of students from rural areas in Croatian higher education. However, an ad hoc analysis based on interviews with students, professors and administrative staff at higher education institutions in Croatia (Krpan, 2009), and on recent international studies (Brown et al., 2016, Looker and Andres, 2001; Rural aspiration, 2015) shows that there are grounds for conducting specific research on the position of this group in higher education in Croatia. In fact, there are indications that persons from rural areas are at a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion and that they have a lower level of health protection and a higher unemployment rate (European Social Fund Operational Programme 2014-2020). For the time being, there is a working hypothesis that secondary school pupils from rural areas enrol in higher education less frequently than pupils from urban areas, and, if they do enrol, they take up studies that are located closer to their place of residence.

According to international analyses available (Brown et al., 2016, Looker and Andres, 2001), the reasons for the under-representation of students from rural areas are the following: 1) financial, since higher education institutions are located in cities; 2) schools in rural areas often do not have the same material, and, especially, teaching resources as schools in urban areas do (in Croatia this is especially pronounced due to decentralised functions in primary and secondary education, with cities having significantly larger means at their disposal than counties do); 3) support from family and environment for pursuing higher education is mostly lacking in rural areas; 4) there is also the problem of digital divide in relation to students from urban areas.

REFUGEES⁷ AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

At the national level there are no data available on the representation of this group in higher education, nor are there relevant studies on these groups at the level of Croatia. According to the official statistics of the Croatian Ministry of the Interior for the last six years, the number of recorded asylum seekers has increased in comparison with the period from 2005 to 2009. An increase in the number of asylum seekers in Croatia was recorded in 2010 when there were 290 asylum seekers, in 2011 – 807, in 2012 – 1,194, in 2013 – 1,089, in 2014 – 453 and in 2015 – 15 (Ministry of the Interior, 2014, 2015, 2016). Until now 97 asylums and 71 subsidiary protections have been granted in Croatia (Ministry of the Interior, 2016). The number of granted protections has been on the rise in comparison to the period until 2009; in 2010 14 requests for protection were granted, in 2011 – 11, in 2012 – 35, in 2013 – 24, in 2014 – 25, and in 2015 – 37 (Ministry of the Interior, 2016). Since there has been an increase in the number of persons under international protection, the need has arisen for establishing more effective mechanisms of social integration in all areas, especially in the areas of education and labour market.

Refugees and asylum seekers have been acknowledged as a vulnerable group on the area of Croatia and Europe, and their integration should be systematically supported by national countries. In the document *"Migration and Mobility: Challenges and Opportunities for EU Education Systems"* (European Commission, 2008), on the subject of migration and mobility in the context of education, the European Commission has acknowledged refugees, asylum seekers and persons who have obtained asylum as a vulnerable group on all levels of education.

Refugees and asylum seekers under subsidiary protection come to Croatia because of a reasonable fear of persecution on the grounds of their race, religion, nationality, political opinions, belonging to a specific social group, or they come to Croatia because they do not feel safe due to war conflicts in their countries of origin. Some of the factors that make this group vulnerable are no knowledge of the Croatian language, low socioeconomic status, insufficient integration into the society, educational system and labour market, unresolved housing accommodation issue etc. Due to these factors this group is exposed to the risk of being marginalised and discriminated against.

Article 70 of the Croatian Act on International and Temporary Protection (Official Gazette Nos. 70/15 and 127/17) states that all persons who have obtained asylum and foreigners under subsidiary protection have the right to higher education under the same conditions as Croatian citizens in accordance with special regulations.

⁷ Refugees are all people under international legal protection (in accordance with Croatian law, they are asylum seekers and foreigners under subsidiary protection). In accordance with international law, asylum seekers also pertain to the group of refugees.

Appendix

PART-TIME STUDENTS⁸

In Croatia there is a significant proportion of part-time students in the general student population (27%), out of which a large number (60%) is working while studying. The pupils who completed grammar schools are mostly full-time students, while pupils who completed vocational schools are part-time students. Although the majority of undergraduate students in Croatia intend to continue their studies at the graduate level (54%), part-time students are less inclined to do so (38%).

According to students' own estimates, the average cost per term for students in Croatia is HRK 15,417.00, which includes both living and study costs. Part-time students are the group of students with the highest costs, and in many aspects a part-time studies are financially more demanding than full-time studies. The average cost per semester for part-time students is HRK 23,341.00, in comparison with a cost of HRK 15,926.00 for full-time students who pay tuition fees, or the cost of HRK 11,001.00 for full-time students who do not pay tuition fees.

Having a job is an especially important part of being a part-time student and it represents a significant source of income for part-time students. A large proportion of part-time students (37%) work full-time jobs (more than 35 hours per week). On the other hand, their income from scholarships and from their families is fairly low. Scholarships are irregularly distributed when it comes to student status: a large proportion of full-time students who do not pay tuition fees receive a scholarship (34%), while part-time students who pay the full amount of tuition fees receive almost no form of a scholarship. More than a third of all students in Croatia (37%) consider their financial difficulties serious or very serious. However, an above average number of part-time students consider their financial difficulties very serious or serious.

The largest proportion of students in Croatia (60%) spends more than 30 hours fulfilling their study obligations (studying and attending study programmes). A total of 44% of part-time students (who should attend part-time studies) spends more than 30 hours a week fulfilling their study obligations. In this way it is extremely difficult for part-time students to work while attending a study programme, which a part of them are forced to do to cover the expenses of studying. Mostly because of work obligations, part-time students attended classes nearly twice as less than full-time students did who do not pay tuition fees (11 hours in comparison to 19 hours per week). When it comes to time spent studying, there is no significant difference between part-time and full-time students.

On a scale from one ("not satisfied at all") to five ("very satisfied"), the average rating of satisfaction of Croatian students with the quality of study programmes, the organisation of study programmes, the schedule, the relationship of the administrative staff towards students and the equipment at the faculty is around three (3). A high level of dissatisfaction is expressed by students who assess the social status of their families as low as well as part-time students, which is not surprising considering the aggravating circumstances of their studying conditions, as previously described.

Full-time students who pay tuition fees (42%) and those who do not pay tuition fees (39%) more frequently plan on studying abroad when compared to part-time students (25%).

STUDENTS OF PROFESSIONAL STUDIES

According to the Eurostudent survey, 50.7% of students completed a grammar school before enrolling in higher education, while 43.1% of them completed a vocational school. Students who completed a gram-

⁸ This section includes Eurostudent data for Croatia (Šćukanec et al., 2016).

mar school form the majority of students at universities (65%), while students who completed a vocational school form the majority of students enrolled in public (78%) and private (72%) professional studies.

According to the Eurostudent survey, most undergraduate students plan to continue their studies on a graduate level (54%). However, students of professional studies are less inclined to do so (37%). A total of 15% of all students in Croatia temporarily interrupt their studies for at least a year. Students of university studies are less likely (9%) to drop out of their study programme before completing the undergraduate programme than students of public (14%) and private (30%) professional studies.

According to the statements of students, the average cost per term for students in Croatia is HRK 15,417.00, which includes both living and study costs. Students of professional studies (both private and public) have higher costs per semester than students of university studies. The average total cost per semester of students of private professional studies is HRK 29,239.00, the average cost of students of public professional studies is HRK 16,281.00, while the average cost of students of university studies is HRK 14,012.00.

Students of university studies are more likely to be awarded grants than students of professional studies. Students of professional studies mostly rely on work income. More than a third of Croatian students (37%) consider their financial difficulties very serious or serious, among which students from polytechnics and schools of professional higher education represent a significant proportion.

The proportion of students who plan to spend a certain time abroad during their studies has increased from 21% to 36% compared with the results of the Croatian Eurostudent survey from 2010 (Farnell et al., 2011). This percentage is significantly higher among students of university studies (40%) than among students enrolled in public professional studies (24%).

Summary on the findings on under-represented and vulnerable groups

UNDER-REPRESENTED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN CROATIA	ADDITIONAL DATA ON THE ENROLMENT AND THE COURSE OF THE STUDIES AND MOBILITY	OVERVIEW OF FACTORS THAT MAKE THE GROUP VULNERABLE
Students whose parents have a lower level of education	<p>The Eurostudent survey sample (Šćukanec et al., 2016) shows that 5.1% of students' fathers have the lowest level of education, while 18.5% of the male population aged 40 to 60 has completed only primary school. The sample also shows that 34% of the students' fathers have completed polytechnics and schools of professional higher education, compared with 17% of total male population. Usually the children of parents with higher education degrees are more likely to enrol in higher education and more frequently plan on studying abroad (Šćukanec et al., 2016).</p> <p>According to the population data collected from the application sheets by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics for students of all years in the academic year of 2010/2011, no significant differences in the study duration patterns (or the frequency of slower study progression) were observed with regards to parental level of education (Farnell et al., 2014).</p>	<p>Students whose parents have a lower level of education exhibit a lower level of academic achievements (Burušić, Babarović and Marković, 2010; Jokić and Ristić Dedić, 2010; Gregurović and Kuti, 2009).</p> <p>Students whose parents have a lower level of education more frequently enrol in vocational schools, especially three-year vocational schools (the supplemental examinations the pupils from three-year vocational schools have to take and the State Matura examination make it harder for these pupils to enrol in higher education) (Matković et al., 2014).</p> <p>Insufficient counselling on education in secondary schools (Košutić et al., 2015).</p> <p>Students whose parents have attained only a primary or secondary level of education more frequently consider their financial difficulties very serious or serious when compared to students whose parents have attained a higher level of education (Šćukanec et al., 2016).</p>
Students from lower-income families	<p>A study conducted by Košutić et al. (2015) shows that secondary school pupils who plan on attending a university differ from those who do not plan nor are not sure whether they will be attending a university by the assets owned by their parents: the pupils who plan on attending a university usually have the most assets.</p>	<p>In a study by Košutić et al. (2015) 1/3 of students stated that insufficient financial resources were the reason for not pursuing higher education. Students from lower-income families often have a permanent job, and students who have a permanent job are more likely to assess the intensity of study obligations to be lower than students who do not have a job (Šćukanec et al., 2016).</p>
Female students in technical fields, male students in humanities	<p>While male students form a significant majority in technical sciences (70%), female students form a significant majority in the humanities and social sciences (74%) and in study programmes in the field of medicine and health (71%) (Šćukanec et al., 2016).</p>	<p>According to Jugović (2015), gender stereotypes about occupations and fields of study constitute an important factor in choosing among various fields of study: the belief that your own gender group is not sufficiently talented for a particular occupation and field of study is associated with a lower probability of choosing that particular study programme.</p>
Mature students	<p>In Croatia 8% of the students enrol in higher education after the age of 21 (Šćukanec et al., 2016). According to Hauschildt et al. (2015) based on the Eurostudent comparative data, 21% of students are 25 or older, whereas, for instance, this proportion amounts to 58% in Finland, 53% in Sweden, 52% in Norway, 46% in Austria, and 44% in Switzerland. Out of 29 countries, Croatia is placed 17th with respect to the proportion of students older than 25. There are indications that mature students more frequently do not complete the first year of their study programme (Mihaljević Kosor, 2010).</p>	<p>Financial difficulties: 51% students who enrolled in higher education at the age of 21 or older consider their financial difficulties very serious or serious, while only 36% of the students younger than 21 feel the same (Šćukanec et al., 2016).</p> <p>The challenge of studying while working: students who started studying after the age of 21 are among the most represented in relation to having a permanent job (Šćukanec et al., 2016.). There are indications that social integration is more difficult for mature students (Doolan et al., 2014).</p> <p>They have not passed the State Matura examination because they completed their secondary school education before the State Matura examination was introduced.</p>

UNDER-REPRESENTED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN CROATIA	ADDITIONAL DATA ON THE ENROLMENT AND THE COURSE OF THE STUDIES AND MOBILITY	OVERVIEW OF FACTORS THAT MAKE THE GROUP VULNERABLE
Students with children	A total of 3% of students have children (Šćukanec et al., 2016). They are an under-represented group if we compare this proportion with those from other European countries. According to Hauschildt et al. (2015), based on the Eurostudent comparative data, out of 29 countries, Croatia is ranked 25th with regard to the proportion of students with children. 90% of students with children do not plan on studying abroad (Šćukanec et al., 2016). A total of 15% of all students in Croatia temporarily interrupt their studies for at least a year. Students with children are more likely to interrupt their studies (22%) (Šćukanec et al., 2016).	Students with children claim that studying is a lot harder for them than it is for other students: they assess the time at their disposal for student obligations more negatively (Doolan et al., 2014). Most students with children (65%) have a full-time or part-time job (Šćukanec et al., 2016).
Disabled students	According to the Eurostudent data, in Croatia 15% of all students temporarily interrupt their studies for at least a year. Students with physical disabilities, mental disabilities or learning disorders are slightly more likely to interrupt their studies (16%) (Šćukanec et al., 2016).	Due to different health conditions or acute illnesses, students are faced with various obstacles: some of them have to undergo physical therapy, some of them have difficulties sitting in lectures for the whole day, some of them need visual magnifiers for textual materials, while some find it difficult to reach dislocated faculty buildings (Doolan et al., 2014).
Students who have completed a vocational school	According to Baranović (2015), 98.5% of grammar school pupils and 75% of four-year vocational school pupils intend to go to university, whereas only 16.5% of three-year vocational school pupils intend to do the same. Students who have completed grammar school are significantly more prone to spending a certain amount of time studying abroad (43%) than those who have completed a vocational school (27%) (Šćukanec et al., 2016). There are indications that students who have completed a vocational school have more difficulty passing their first year examinations (Mihaljević Kosor, 2010; Doolan, 2010).	According to Matković et al., (2014), the obligation to get a four-year vocational qualification and to take the State Matura examination presents an obstacle to pupils from three-year vocational schools who wish to enrol in higher education. According to Doolan (2010), students who previously completed certain vocational schools express dissatisfaction with how they had been prepared for their studies while in secondary school both in respect to content (curriculum) and in respect to work habits.
Students who work while studying	According to the Eurostudent data (Šćukanec et al., 2016), 44% of students had a full-time or part-time job during the term in which the survey was conducted. Students whose parents do not have higher education degrees, students who started studying after the age of 21 and students with children are over-represented in relation to having a permanent job (Šćukanec et al., 2016).	Students who have a permanent job have less time for their studies than students who do not work (Šćukanec et al., 2016).
Students commuting to class from another county	According to the Eurostudent data (Šćukanec et al., 2016), 13% of all students are commuting to class to another county.	According to Doolan et al. (2014), students commuting to their place of study from another county cannot attend all of the lectures due to travel expenses and irregular public transport services. Because of the time spent on commuting, those students also have less time to study (Doolan et al., 2014).
Students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans	A total of 302 children of deceased Croatian Homeland War veterans under the age of 19 are yet to enter higher education (Ministry of Croatian Homeland War veterans, 2016).	The loss of a parent has a long-term negative effect on academic achievement. This negative effect is more pronounced the longer a child spent growing up without a parent. The psychological consequences of losing a parent early in life are becoming more pronounced as the child is growing up (Kovač, 2015).
Roma students	According to Baranović (2009), only a few members of the Roma minority attend higher education. The report mentions the data from the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports for 2007 – according to the Ministry, only 10 Roma students were enrolled in higher education.	The members of the Roma minority rarely enrol in grammar schools, which is an obstacle to pursuing higher education (Baranović, 2009). According to Baranović (2009), a relatively small number of subjects express an interest in enrolling in higher education.

UNDER-REPRESENTED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN CROATIA	ADDITIONAL DATA ON THE ENROLMENT AND THE COURSE OF THE STUDIES AND MOBILITY	OVERVIEW OF FACTORS THAT MAKE THE GROUP VULNERABLE
LGBT students	In the study performed in the project "E-Quality: Connecting quality and social inclusion in higher education in Croatia", students declared that LGBT students are a potentially vulnerable group of students at higher education institutions in Croatia.	The results of a study on secondary school pupils in Croatia (Jugović and Bezinović, 2015) demonstrate that LGBT pupils are more frequently exposed to relational and physical violence than their heterosexual fellow pupils.
Students from alternative care systems	Around 200 children without appropriate parental care from children's homes and foster families complete secondary school every year in Croatia, with a part of them having aspirations to enrol in higher education.	Young people from alternative care systems frequently enrol in vocational schools, after which it is difficult to pursue higher education. Financial problems also make it difficult for this group of young people to enrol in higher education (Šimić, Kusturin, Zenko, 2011).
Homeless students and students at risk of becoming homeless	According to the information from the Ombudsman's office collected from interviews with the representatives of the Croatian Network for the Homeless, in 2015 and 2016 there were cases of young people (among them several higher education students) seeking help from regional homeless centres because of losing their permanent place of residence due to extraordinary life circumstances.	Financial difficulties.
Students from rural areas, small towns and islands	Persons from rural areas are at a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion and they have a lower level of healthcare and a higher unemployment rate (Operational Programme, 2015).	The reasons for the under-representation of students from rural areas include financial difficulties because higher education institutions are located in cities; schools in rural areas often do not have the same resources as the schools in urban areas; there is a lower level of support from family and environment to pursue higher education; there is also the problem of digital divide in relation to students from urban areas.
Refugees and asylum seekers	In the 2008 document on migrations and mobility in the context of education, the European Commission recognised refugees, asylum seekers and persons who have obtained asylum as a vulnerable group of people.	No knowledge of the Croatian language, poor socioeconomic status, insufficient integration into the society, education system and labour market, unresolved housing issues.

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GUIDELINES FOR ENHANCING THE SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

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INTRODUCTION

The number of students with disabilities studying at public higher education institutions in Croatia is growing each year (Strategy for Education, Science and Technology, Official Gazette No. 124/14). This is clearly the result of greater awareness among persons with disabilities about their own rights and capabilities, as well as greater self-confidence and stronger motivation to tackle the challenges of student life. The increase in the number of students with disabilities is also partly due to the notable development of a support system for students with disabilities in higher education in Croatia, which has taken place over the last few years. What started in the form of student activism and high-quality interventions by student organisations and civil society organisations for persons with disabilities (which addressed everyday problems faced by students with disabilities) eventually resulted in the establishment and development of institutional support services for students with disabilities at all Croatian universities, as well as some polytechnics and schools of professional higher education. Despite these developments, there is nevertheless a need to further improve the support system for students with disabilities in higher education in Croatia and this document represents a contribution to that objective.

On 17 October 2014, the Croatian Parliament adopted the Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (Official Gazette No. 124/14), which included a measure (6.2.1) referring to the establishment of a cross-sectoral National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education. The National Group should act as an advisory body of the Government of the Republic of Croatia, the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, the Rector's Conference, and the Council of Polytechnics and Schools of Professional Higher Education. The National Group was established on 18 September 2015.

Regarding the improvement of the support system for students with disabilities by equalising access to higher education, the task of the National Group is to implement several measures of the Strategy:

Measure 6.4.2 Adapt the procedures for application and enrolment at higher education institutions for persons with disabilities. All necessary information about enrolment in higher education institutions should be equally accessible to persons with disabilities.

Measure 6.4.3 Adjust approaches to teaching and to the assessment of knowledge, skills and abilities for students with disabilities, and enable them to demonstrate their acquisition of defined learning outcomes in an equitable way. Organise relevant training for teaching staff.

Measure 6.4.5 Ensure the operation of institutional support services and professional bodies for students with disabilities.

One of the activities of the work programme of the National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education¹ is to prepare a summary of the existing literature on students with disabilities, i.e. a document with guidelines for providing support to students with disabilities. In addition to providing this summary, the current document offers a broad empirical basis for preparing the section of the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education 2016-2020 related to students with disabilities. Namely, since the status of students with disabilities and the issues they are faced with are highly complex, a more complete insight into the matter will offer a firmer basis and better-founded arguments for developing such guidelines.

This document therefore presents and analyses the current state of affairs regarding the support available to students with disabilities in Croatia based on a literature review and based on the results of

1 https://mzo.hr/sites/default/files/migrated/nacionalna_skupina_radni_program_javno-lektor.pdf

research conducted in Croatia involving students with disabilities, their teachers and peers. In addition, this document is also based on data collected by higher education institutions via a survey questionnaire that covered the topics of student rights, adapted procedures, information systems, institutional forms of support, spatial accessibility, accommodation, grants, data collection and inter-institutional cooperation related to students with disabilities.

The first section of the document summarises the legal requirements regarding the accessibility of higher education for persons with disabilities. The document then offers a definition of students with disabilities, provides an estimate of the number of such students in Croatia and describes the institutional support services for students with disabilities in higher education, as well as evaluations of that system by students with disabilities. The subsequent section provides a description of students' rights (and the measures that need to be taken for students to exercise these rights), from their rights during the enrolment process (the importance of timely information and enrolment precedence) to their rights during their studies (subsidising study costs, facilitating access to study programmes, grants, adapted teaching, the importance of teaching, professional and administrative staff training at higher education institutions, providing adapted assessments of acquired competences, peer support and educational assistance, as well as providing spatial accessibility, adapted transport and accommodation). The final section also describes the obligations of students with disabilities.

Every part of the document provides guidelines or recommendations for enhancing the support system for students with disabilities. At the end of the document, arguments are provided to support the aforementioned measures of the Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (Official Gazette No. 124/14), and the measures are elaborated in more detail. The document closes with a conclusion and a bibliography section.

Legislative framework

There are legal requirements for ensuring equal opportunities (i.e. accessibility) of higher education to persons with disabilities in Croatia. However, these requirements are not covered by a single document, but are instead found in a range of documents: the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia,² the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), the Scientific Activity and Higher Education Act (Official Gazette Nos. 123/03, 198/03, 105/04, 174/04, 46/07, 63/11, 94/13, 139/13), the Anti-discrimination Act (Official Gazette No. 85/08), the Act on the Single Expertise Body (Official Gazette Nos. 85/14, 95/15), the Act on the Croatian Sign Language and Other Communication Systems for Deaf and Deafblind Persons in the Republic of Croatia (Official Gazette No. 82/15), the National Strategy for Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities 2007-2015 (Official Gazette No. 63/07) and in articles of association of public universities and other public higher education institutions, as well as in numerous other documents and public calls. However, the current regulations are not always followed by concrete measures of the competent institutions that would ensure that equal opportunities (which are defined in these regulations) are genuinely realised in practice (Ensuring Minimum Accessibility Standards for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education, 2012).

Even students with disabilities themselves highlight the importance of implementing the legislative framework as a prerequisite for exercising their rights (Bačani et al., 2015).

Who are students with disabilities?

There is no uniform definition of students with disabilities in Croatia. However, a definition that is largely accepted is one from the first document in this field: the Ordinance on the organisation and functioning of the Office for Students with Disabilities of the University of Zagreb from 2007 and the Ordinance

² Consolidated text of the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia: <http://www.zakon.hr/z/94/Ustav-Republike-Hrvatske>

amending the regulation on the organisation and functioning of the Office for Students with Disabilities of the University of Zagreb from 2013³ (Article 3). According to this ordinance, students with disabilities are *"... all students who experience permanent, occasional or temporary difficulties in their day-to-day academic activities due to illness, impairment or disorders irrespective of any formal assessment of the percentage of physical impairment (students with visual and hearing impairments, motor disorders, chronic illnesses, mental illnesses and disorders,⁴ and specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, dysgraphia and ADHD and other health conditions and difficulties that can have an impact on studying)"*. This definition conceptually complies with the definition of persons with disabilities mentioned in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) and it completely complies with the Minimum Standards for Disabled Persons for UNICA Universities from 2008.⁵

Since students with disabilities form such a highly heterogeneous group, their difficulties and needs in the higher education system are also diverse and individualised. Despite this, these difficulties and needs can be generally viewed in relation to the type of impairment, including: the need for spatial accessibility and accessibility of services (persons with motor disorders); the need for adapted access to literature (persons with visual impairment); the need for providing a communication intermediary (persons with hearing impairments); the need for flexibility in relation to deadlines given for fulfilling student obligations and sometimes to the daily rhythm of activities (students with chronic illnesses and mental health issues); and the need for adapted teaching materials and methods of assessing knowledge (students with specific learning difficulties and sometimes students with motor and sensory impairments). In addition to these adaptations, which mostly fall within the competence of higher education institutions, the inclusion of persons with disabilities also depends on the preparedness of children with developmental problems to continue their education and on the availability of adapted transport and adapted accommodation, on available assistance in student residence halls and canteens and on the availability of assistive technology (Kiš-Glavaš, 2012).

How many students with disabilities are there in Croatia?

As highlighted above, the number of students with disabilities studying at public higher education institutions in Croatia is growing each year (Strategy for Education, Science and Technology, Official Gazette No. 124/14). Even students with disabilities themselves point out the increase in the number of persons with disabilities enrolled in study programmes as a positive change that definitely contributes to the reduction of discrimination against persons with disabilities (Bačani et al., 2015). Although certain higher education institutions do keep a record of students with disabilities who are recipients of some form of support, there are no reliable data on the total number of students with disabilities enrolled in Croatian higher education institutions. The records of institutional support services for students with disabilities at seven Croatian universities show that a total of 571 students with disabilities are recipients of some kind of support in the higher education system. In addition, 34 polytechnics and schools of professional higher education that collect such data report having a total of 110 enrolled students with disabilities. It is therefore possible to estimate that there 700 registered students with disabilities in Croatia.

The Ombudswoman for Persons with Disabilities⁶ reports that there are 364 students with disabilities in Croatia, of whom 329 are full-time students. Other estimates by the Department for Research and Development of the Fields of Disabilities with a Register of Persons with Disabilities (Act on the Croatian Register of Persons with Disabilities, Official Gazette No. 64/01) significantly differ from one another, depending on the applied methodology. One estimate is that there are somewhere between 400 and 500 students with disabilities (projections based on frequency of higher-educated persons with disabilities in

3 <http://www.unizg.hr/uredssi/index.php/lang-hr/dokumenti>

4 Mental impairments, according to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006).

5 <http://www.unizg.hr/uredssi/index.php/lang-hr/dokumenti>

6 <http://www.posi.hr/>

the total population of higher-educated citizens, and taking into account the upward trend in this area). Another estimate is that there are as many as 6,400 students with disabilities (projection based on the frequency of disabilities in the age group from 18 to 25 in relation to the total number of students in Croatia). Such major differences in data and projections on the number of students with disabilities point to the need for the systematic collection of this type of data.

The results of the Eurostudent V survey for Croatia (Eurostudent, 2014) indicate that out of 2551 students participating in the survey, up to 14% of them self-assessed that they have one of the following health difficulties: chronic illness (5%), visual or hearing impairments (5%), learning difficulties (3%), long-term physical and/or health-related impairment (3%), mental disorder (2%) and mobility problems (1%).

According to data of the National Centre for External Evaluation of Education,⁷ in the school year 2009/2010 there were 178 applicants who required adapted examination technology and who took at least one State Matura examination (148 of them passed their mandatory examinations, while 127 of them gained the right to enrol in higher education that year). The number of applicants rose systematically until the school year 2014/2015 when it reached 569 applicants (423 of them passed their mandatory examinations, while 445 of them gained the right to enrol in higher education that year). If we were to assume that all the applicants with disabilities who gained the right to enrol in higher education in the last five years would currently be enrolled as students in the system, then this would mean that a total of 1648 students with disabilities would be enrolled in higher education in Croatia. However, experience shows that even though some pupils exercise their right to use adapted examination technology during their State Matura examinations, not all students decide to use the special adaptation that they are entitled to in higher education. This is especially the case for students with so-called invisible disabilities (specific learning difficulties, chronic illnesses and mental health issues), who consequently are not registered as being students with disabilities. Some of the underlying reasons for this could be that some students do not wish to be "labelled" as disabled or that they are determined to complete their studies on their own without the help of special adaptation and positive discrimination. Other reasons could be the fact that some of them may not know their own rights, or that that adaptations (i.e. the support system) are not made available to them at their higher education institution.

GUIDELINES:

- Intensify public information campaigns, especially to provide information to pupils with developmental difficulties on their rights and on the adaptation system available to students with disabilities in higher education
- Systematically collect data on students with disabilities who are recipients of some form of support in higher education

Institutional support services

According to qualitative research conducted at the University of Zagreb, students with disabilities that participated in the research emphasised the importance of systematic support at the level of higher education institutions and recognised the positive role of the Office for Students with Disabilities, which provides them with necessary information and support (Bačani et al., 2015). All Croatian universities have some form of formalised support services for students with disabilities.

The Office for Students with Disabilities of the University of Zagreb is the oldest and the most developed example of such a support service.⁸ It began its work in 2007 in accordance with the decision of the

⁷ <http://www.ncvvo.hr/drzavnamatura/web/public/home>

⁸ <http://www.unizg.hr/uredssi/>

University Senate. The Ordinance on the organisation and functioning of the Office for Students with Disabilities of the University of Zagreb was adopted the same year and formally regulated the organisation, competences, mode of operation, tasks and activities of the office. The Committee for Students with Disabilities operates as a part of the organisation of the office, acting as a professional body responsible for creating plans, priorities and activities of the office, as well as providing expert opinions and recommendations for addressing difficulties faced by students with disabilities, their teachers and the rest of the university staff in the course of their studies. Coordinators for students with disabilities (who are members of teaching staff) play an important role in the operation of the office, along with the Coordination for Students with Disabilities (student representatives appointed at each constituent unit). In 2011, the University of Zagreb adopted Guidelines for the equalisation of study opportunities for persons with dyslexia.⁹ In 2015, Guidelines for approaching students with mental health problems and chronic diseases in academic surroundings¹⁰ were also adopted within the framework of the IPA project StuDiSupport (conducted in cooperation with the University of Rijeka and the Faculty of Organisation and Informatics of the University of Zagreb). This represented an important breakthrough in ensuring rights and support for these groups of students. Moreover, the Strategy for the Development of the Student Support of the University of Zagreb 2013-2025¹¹ was also developed, as well as the Draft Guidelines for the Development of the Student Support System.¹² Today, the office operates within the Student Counselling and Support Centre of the University of Zagreb.¹³ In 2015, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences also established its own Office for Students with Disabilities. At this moment, 400 students with disabilities enrolled in the University of Zagreb are recipients of some kind of support, yet the Office for Students with Disabilities employs only one person.

At the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek,¹⁴ the Office for Students with Disabilities began operating in 2009. Certain constituent units of the university officially appointed coordinators for students with disabilities, while at other constituent units an employee of the student services office is unofficially responsible for students with disabilities. The Office for Students with Disabilities of the University of Osijek, which also employs only one person, cooperates with the vice deans for education and students and (when necessary) with the deputy heads of department for education and students of the university's constituent units. There are 54 students with disabilities currently registered at this university.

At the University of Rijeka, the support system for students with disabilities is being developed as a part of the University Counselling Centre. As a part of the Office for Students with Disabilities,¹⁵ a Council for the Office for Students with Disabilities operates as a professional body that offers operational help to the office coordinator (one employee), considers matters within the scope of the office and offers advice, opinions and recommendations in relation to the scope of work of the office. The University of Rijeka has appointed coordinators for students with disabilities (teaching staff responsible for offering support at the level of the constituent unit) at each of its constituent units. According to data of the Office for Students with Disabilities, 58 students with disabilities are studying at the University of Rijeka at this moment.

At the University of Zadar, the Committee for Students with Disabilities, whose head is the Vice-Rector for Studies and Student Affairs, offers support to students with disabilities. At this moment, they have five students with disabilities receiving some form of support.

The Juraj Dobrila University of Pula established a Committee for Students with Disabilities at the university level,¹⁶ as well as the Student Counselling Centre. There are four registered students with disabilities at

9 http://www.unizg.hr/uredssi/images/datoteke/smjernice_disleksija.pdf

10 <http://www.ssc.uniri.hr/hr/sveucilisni-savjetovalisni-centar/projekti-i-suradnje/ipa-projekt-studisupport.html>

11 <http://www.unizg.hr/o-sveucilistu/dokumenti-i-javnost-informacija/dokumenti-sveucilista/strateski-dokumenti/>

12 <http://www.ssc.uniri.hr/hr/sveucilisni-savjetovalisni-centar/projekti-i-suradnje/ipa-projekt-studisupport.html>

13 <http://www.unizg.hr/studiji-i-studiranje/podrska-studentima/centar-za-savjetovanje-i-podrsku-studentima/>

14 <http://www.unios.hr/studenti/studenti-s-invaliditetom/podrska/>

15 <http://www.ssc.uniri.hr/hr/ured-za-studente-s-invaliditetom>

16 <http://www.unipu.hr/index.php?id=1583&L=1%2Fsupport.php%3Fid%3D%27>

the University of Pula.

The University of Split does not have an institutionalised form of support for students with disabilities, e.g. in the form of an office. However, it has appointed commissioners for students with disabilities in all of its constituent units. A University Centre for Student Counselling has also been established, comprising the following counselling services: a career counselling service, a counselling service for students with disabilities,¹⁷ a medical counselling service, a psychological counselling service, a kinesiology counselling service, a legal counselling service and a counselling service for interreligious dialogue and for student pastoral care. In the academic year 2014/2015, 49 students with disabilities were registered.

The University of Dubrovnik has appointed a coordinator for students with disabilities.¹⁸ There are two students with disabilities currently studying at this university.

Most of the universities provide various forms of support to students with disabilities at the university level and the level of its constituent units through their institutionalised support services. However, they do not provide the same services at all universities and all of their constituent units. According to written sources from the heads of support services at universities, the forms of support include direct support to students, future students, teachers, administrative and professional university staff. The types of services provided are the following: information, lectures, workshops, counselling and training; creation of guides on spatial accessibility of constituent units; individualised adaptation in teaching and examinations; adaptation of teaching materials; creation and adaptation of audio recordings of lectures; digitisation of literature; e-courses accessible to persons with disabilities; mediation in securing adapted transport; accommodation in a residence hall with adapted rooms and assistance; training of canteen staff; spatial adaptation and procurement of assistive technology; grants and awards for the most successful students with disabilities; peer support; educational assistance; volunteer services; contacts with civil society organisations and with competent institutions.

According to survey results, institutional support services for students with disabilities have also been established at some polytechnics and schools of professional higher education, especially those that have registered students with disabilities. The services mostly take the form of counselling centres, but also through offices and the ombudspersons for students, which cooperate with civil society organisations for persons with disabilities at the local level. As for the support system for students with disabilities, the support vastly differs and mostly consists of recommending e-learning to students, counselling and instructing of teaching staff by experts, providing alternative ways of taking examinations and using computers for assessing knowledge, as well as through activities of coordinators, mentor students and student assistants for students with disabilities.

According to a study by Milić Babić and Dowling (2015), students with disabilities point out that the support provided by higher education institution coordinators should include an initial conversation with the students who ask the coordinator for help. It should also include the process of defining needs, monitoring, evaluating experiences, creating plans for improving practice and, above all, a general strategy for development and continuous individualised approach based on the needs and experiences of youth with disabilities. It should be noted that even though they are being systematically educated and supported in their efforts to provide adequate support to students with disabilities, coordinators for students with disabilities (depending on their original profession) are not always equally prepared to provide that kind of support. They provide support on a voluntary basis. It is not a part of their regular working obligations and it does not count as one of the tasks taken into consideration when being evaluated for promotion. Moreover, they are not paid or otherwise rewarded for their additional engagement. They are enthusiasts who have decided to devote their time to this vulnerable group of students. Furthermore, they often have to carry out activities that lead to arguments with colleagues and mostly include strong emotional

17 http://www.ffst.unist.hr/intranet/studenti_s_invaliditetom

18 www.unidu.hr

engagement in the form of the empathy shown for students' personal problems.

Finally, it should be added that the implementation of the Tempus project "Education for Equal Opportunities at Croatian Universities - EduQuality",¹⁹ whose coordinator was the University of Zagreb, gave the biggest momentum to the development of various support offices and services. All Croatian universities participated in the project (although not all of them formally) and, by the end of the project, institutional support services for students with disabilities were established at all of the universities that did not have such services in place before. Moreover, new activities were developed that further contribute to the equalisation of opportunities for students with disabilities, which in turn increases student wellbeing and enhances quality. For instance, assistive technology was procured for students with disabilities at all universities. Additionally, the university course "Peer Support for Students with Disabilities" was developed and launched, as well as a training programme for university staff (teaching, professional and administrative staff) on the capabilities of students with different forms of disabilities and on the possibilities of adapting academic content to their capabilities without compromising academic standards. One of the most important outcomes of the project was the creation of a Draft National Document for Ensuring Minimum Standards of Accessibility of Higher Education for Students with Disabilities in the Republic of Croatia (2012), which was supported by the Rector's Conference in 2013. The Rector's Conference also adopted a special decision on relating to the section of the national document on minimum accessibility standards. The document was also adopted by the Senate of the University of Zagreb in 2013. The document has identified crucial problems students with disabilities face and which need to be systematically resolved. Furthermore, concrete guidelines and recommendations were given for their resolution by competent institutions.

ACTION GUIDELINES:

- Establish an institutionalised form of support for students with disabilities at all higher education institutions (including polytechnics and schools of professional higher education) according to the number and the needs of students with disabilities
- Include the engagement of coordinators, commissioners and other persons providing support to students with disabilities as one of the criteria for promotion into teaching ranks

Evaluation of the support system for students with disabilities

The Ombudswoman for Persons with Disabilities concluded that "there is no systematic support for students with disabilities and, even where such support exists, it is neither sufficient nor regulated" (Slonjšak, 2014).

According to results of the Eurostudent V survey (Eurostudent, 2014), among all students who assessed that they have some form of health-related difficulty, 58% stated that they do not need any kind of support, 1% stated that the available support is of extremely high quality and 27% stated that the available support is of very poor quality.

The project "Multi-Dimensional Analysis of Social Inclusion of Children and Students with Disabilities in the Educational Process"²⁰ (developed by the Croatian Association of Deafblind Persons "Dodir" and funded by the European Union through IPA funds) conducted a survey on a sample of 73 students with disabilities studying at the universities in Zagreb, Split, Rijeka, Osijek, Pula and Zadar. The survey results showed that, although students with disabilities have high expectations concerning the support system in higher education, they only give a modestly positive assessment of the current support system. The significant dispersion of the survey results also suggests that students' responses to this question differ greatly (Kiš-Glavaš, 2014). University staff included in the survey (173 of them) are less generous when evaluating

¹⁹ <http://www.eduquality-hr.com/>

²⁰ <http://dodir.hr/ipa/>

the current support system for students with disabilities and their results show a slightly negative trend. University teaching staff from Zagreb hold the current support system in higher regard than teaching staff from other Croatian universities (Kiš-Glavaš, 2014). The qualitative part of the research shows that students' experiences are diverse and uneven in relation to the accessibility of particular faculties and the adaptation of teaching, ranging from extremely positive and supportive experiences to experiences that suggest the insensitivity of the system and the ignorance of teachers and other participants. Students rightfully recognise that the system is made up of people and that it is not enough to rely on technological advancement that makes it easier to keep up in class. Teaching and non-teaching staff should be systematically educated instead (Urbanc et al., 2014).

Further analyses have shown that students' assessments of their satisfaction with the support system differs depending on the type of their impairment. Students with hearing impairments are significantly less satisfied with the support system than any other of the aforementioned groups of students, with the exception of students with so-called invisible disabilities. The most satisfied students are those with motor disorders, i.e. who use wheelchairs (Kiš-Glavaš, 2014). The latter result must be due to the students' positive perception of the substantial improvement of the spatial accessibility in general, including that of higher education institutions (Bačani et al., 2015).

It has also been shown that student peers (511 of them), but also members of civil society organisations for persons with disabilities (53 of them), have a lack of awareness about the academic support system for students with disabilities. Members of civil society organisations display a better understanding of legal regulations, while student peers have a better knowledge of the rights of students with disabilities during their studies, including their right to adaptations of teaching and examinations (Kiš-Glavaš, 2014).

Another study (Franjkić et al., 2014) shows that, in general, students without disabilities have a positive perception of the capabilities of students with disabilities to meet the requirements of the study programme. However, they also point to the need to develop and improve the relevant programmes for informing and educating students about the characteristics and capabilities of persons with disabilities.

On the other hand, a study by Bačani et al. (2015) reports that students without disabilities are prejudiced against students with disabilities because they think teachers are more lenient towards them and that they lower their expectations.

ACTION GUIDELINES:

- Students with disabilities, teaching staff, professional staff and administrative staff at higher education institutions should systematically evaluate the support system and, based on results achieved, work on its further improvement
- Systematically inform the academic community and the broader public about the opportunities, rights and obligations of persons with disabilities in higher education

ENROLMENT

The importance of timely information

Although students with disabilities can choose to enrol in any study programme, we should not overlook the fact that they have certain limitations (i.e. disability as functionally reduced ability or abilities) due to their illness, impairment or disorders, which can affect the fulfilment of the requirements of certain study programmes (Franjkić et al., 2014). Research by Urbanc et al. (2014) has shown that students with disabilities emphasise the great importance of awareness of one's own limitations when choosing a

study programme. This applies to all students, including students with disabilities. Therefore, vocational guidance is a crucial procedure for making the right decision when choosing a study programme. The decision should primarily be based on the professional interests of applicants with disabilities while taking into account their capabilities. It is therefore crucial to inform applicants well about the potential obstacles they may face during the course of the study programme and allow them to make an informed decision about which study programme to choose, so they can take responsibility for their academic success, but also for their possible academic failure. It should be obligatory to inform prospective students in this way and, if no insurmountable obstacle has been detected regarding the likelihood of applicants achieving the defined learning outcomes of the study programme based on their functional abilities, such applicants should obtain a recommendation from the higher education institution that they wish to apply to.

Availability of information is crucial to all students, especially those with disabilities who are faced with various obstacles and are often unable to access places or services that are taken for granted by most people in their everyday life or in the academic environment (Barić et al., 2012). Access to information for persons with disabilities is an area that is defined in numerous regulations such as the Act on the Right of Access to Information (Official Gazette No. 172/03), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), the Anti-Discrimination Act (Official Gazette No. 85/08), the National Strategy for Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities 2007-2015 (Official Gazette No. 63/07), etc.

As soon as they enter the higher education system, it is essential that applicants have all the relevant information about the study programmes that they are considering enrolling in, as well as on the enrolment requirements that need to be fulfilled. They also require information about the opportunities that are offered to students at the place of study, especially in cases when students relocate to another area, which implies greater independence of the student. The latter, though important to all students, is especially important to students with disabilities who depend on various forms of aid and support provided by other persons. For this reason, the availability of particular services is sometimes a key factor for students with disabilities when choosing the study programme and the place of study (Barić et al., 2012).

The type of information that should therefore be made available to students with disabilities (as much as it is to other students) includes information on the higher education institution, on study programmes (and the choice of study programmes) and on special rights for students with disabilities. Other important information such as the working hours, availability and adaptability of student service offices, libraries and other relevant services for students should also be made available.²¹ Information should be made available in both traditional and alternative formats (including black print, Braille, enlarged print and through notifications sent electronically via e-mail or SMS), on notice boards, on adapted web pages (made according to the rules on e-accessibility),²² on social networks and on e-learning platforms (see Guidelines for Ensuring Accessibility of Teaching Materials on E-learning Platforms).²³

Timely and complete information enables students to make informed choices, which is especially important for life decisions such as choosing a study programme. In addition, as stated above, all applicants with disabilities should be obliged to speak to coordinators for students with disabilities, heads of study programmes and vice-deans for education about possible difficulties they may face in achieving the learning outcomes of the study programme that they wish to apply for. This is necessary in order to prevent possible difficulties related to the inability to achieve certain learning outcomes of a mandatory course or study programme caused by possible limitations as a consequence of an impairment, illness or disorder and in order to ensure necessary adaptations ahead of time.

21 For more information, see Barić et al. (2012) at http://www.eduquality-hr.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=107&Itemid=48&lang=hr

22 <http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG10/>

23 <http://www.srce.unizg.hr/vijest/prilagodba-sustava-za-e-ucenje-merlin-prema-smjernicama-pristupacnosti-738/>

ACTION GUIDELINES:

- Publish information (that is also adapted for students with disabilities) on higher education institutions, study programmes and study conditions on websites of higher education institutions and their constituent units
- Educate the staff responsible for editing the websites of higher education institutions on the guidelines for e-accessibility
- Introduce obligatory consultations between prospective students with disabilities (who demonstrate an interest and intention to continue their education) and institutional support services for students with disabilities at the higher education institution that they intend to apply to
- After considering the applicants' functional abilities, issue a recommendation for enrolment in a study programme to those applicants who will not face obstacles in achieving the learning outcomes of the study programme (or if any possible obstacles can be removed with the help of the support system)

Priority enrolment policy

The universities of Zagreb, Split, Rijeka, Osijek, Zadar and Dubrovnik give priority to applicants with disabilities when enrolling in higher education (for university undergraduate, integrated undergraduate and graduate study programmes, as well as professional study programmes). Their calls for applicants, which are announced every academic year, state that applicants whose determined percentage of physical impairment is 60% or above²⁴ can enrol in a study programme on condition that they pass the minimum threshold and also (if required) a special examination of additional abilities, which can include individualised adaptation. If they are not ranked within the enrolment quota, they are enrolled outside the quota. Certain polytechnics and schools of professional higher education also provide priority enrolment to applicants with disabilities.

This measure was probably taken because it was considered that the competences that applicants with disabilities had acquired during their primary and secondary schooling (in either regular education or special education programmes) would not have put them on a level playing field with other applicants for enrolment. Such a measure was probably also intended to increase the proportion of students with disabilities in the overall student population. The measure provided an opportunity for many persons with disabilities to gain a higher education qualification by acquiring professional competences on their own merits, along with reasonable accommodations (i.e. only with necessary and justified compensatory measures).²⁵ In addition, these applicants needed to compensate for certain competences that they were unable to acquire during their previous levels of education, thus putting them at a disadvantage for enrolling in higher education. However, certain students with disabilities are not capable of this.

Priority enrolment is an example of a measure aimed at equalising the disadvantaged position of applicants with disabilities compared to the typical population. This approach is an example of preferential treatment. This manner of equalising opportunities implies that persons with disabilities should be placed in a more favourable position than others because they are initially in a disadvantaged position due to their disability or due to the maladjustment of their environment to their capabilities. Since this approach

²⁴ A degree of physical impairment of at least 60% is the most common criterion for determining the eligibility of students with disabilities to financial support. This criterion, however, excludes (and arguably discriminates against) numerous groups of students who do not have physical impairments, but still face various obstacles in higher education caused by impairments, illnesses or disorders. Such groups include students with specific learning difficulties, mental health issues and chronic illnesses and disorders.

²⁵ Compensatory measures include compensation for being in a disadvantaged position by making all resources available through reasonable adaptation to persons with disabilities, i.e. by ensuring accessibility, providing assistance, support, etc. In the context of higher education, this would include ensuring accessibility and availability of adapted information, adapting class materials and ways of taking exams and providing assistance in the educational process. When implementing compensatory measures, it should be kept in mind that they lead to greater independence of students with disabilities, rather than their greater dependence.

effectively goes to the opposite extreme (whereby it is not possible to avoid the discrimination of “others”), it is only applied in situations when it is not possible to achieve the objective in any other way. It is always applied temporarily and exceptionally and only until the initial reasons behind the measure have been resolved, whereby the initial problems should be addressed in a timely manner. Unfortunately, still very little is done in Croatia to raise the quality of education for children with developmental problems, in terms of their preparation for a successful progression through the education system all the way to the higher education level.

Ultimately, this approach to persons with disabilities usually becomes counterproductive because it reduces the motivation of persons with disabilities and increases the presence of negative attitudes of the community because of the unfairness inherent in the approach. It increases mistrust in the ability of persons with disabilities, it delays problem-solving by reducing the issue to “filling holes” instead of finding a permanent solution to a problem that may escalate down the line, and is also extremely expensive (Kiš-Glavaš, 2012).

According to research conducted by Milić Babić and Dawling (2015), students with disabilities that participated in the research stated that it is necessary to put an end to the positive discrimination that is reflected in the priority enrolment policy based on disability, i.e. determined based on the percentage of physical impairment of students with disabilities.

The priority enrolment policy also results in the fact that many students with disabilities enrol in “attractive” study programmes because of the lowered admission criteria, which significantly increases the total number of students enrolled above the quota in such study programmes. This can have a direct negative impact on the quality of teaching due to problems with organising and carrying out exercises, seminars and practical classes for large numbers of students.

ACTION GUIDELINES:

- Expand the definition of students with disabilities who can exercise specific rights in the higher education system (priority enrolment, subsidised study costs, grants)
- When providing support to students with disabilities in higher education, insist on the implementation of compensatory measures, whereas preferential treatment for students with disabilities should only be used temporarily in exceptional cases
- When implementing compensatory measures, it should be kept in mind that they lead to greater independence of students with disabilities, rather than their greater dependence
- In order to avoid the negative effects of positive discrimination measures, the right of students with disabilities to priority enrolment (i.e. direct enrolment outside the enrolment quota) should be limited so that applicants with disabilities should not have a score that is less than 20% lower than the lowest-ranked applicant that gained the right of full-time enrolment and that no more than 15% (in relation to the enrolment quota) of applicants with disabilities should be enrolled outside the quota

STUDYING

Subsidising tuition fees

The new tuition fee system established in 2012 provides students with disabilities with certain benefits. In accordance with the decisions adopted by the Croatian Government,²⁶ students whose degree of physical

²⁶ Decision of the Government of the Republic of Croatia on fully subsidising tuition fees for full-time students at public universities in Croatia in the

impairment is 60% or more have the right to a full tuition fee subsidy if they manage to earn 30 ECTS credits (in contrast to students who do not have a determined physical impairment of 60% or more, who need to earn at least 55 ECTS credits in order to exercise the same right).

In addition to this decision at the national level, the University of Rijeka adopted a decision at the level of its university senate relating to also subsidising tuition fees for part-time students. The decision in question equalises the rights of students with disabilities whose determined physical impairment is 60% or more with the rights of students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans with disabilities, by allowing them to only pay up to 50% of the tuition fee for part-time studies.²⁷

In certain polytechnics and schools of professional higher education, persons with disabilities whose determined degree of physical impairment is 60% or more are fully or partially exempt from paying tuition fees.

ACTION GUIDELINES:

- Continue subsidising tuition fees for students with disabilities, with a clear student performance criterion

Facilitating access to studies for students with disabilities

As previously mentioned, in 2012 public higher education institutions entered a three-year funding agreement with the former Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, which regulated the subsidising of tuition fees for full-time students in the academic years 2012/2013, 2013/2014 and 2014/2015. As part of the agreement, higher education institutions agreed to achieve general and specific objectives of their own choice, with the aim of improving teaching and the study system overall and thereby indirectly improving the quality of management of public higher education institutions in Croatia. Higher education institutions agreed to address at least four objectives (at least three of which should be taken from the list of general objectives) within the term of the agreement. Four out of seven Croatian universities (the universities of Zagreb, Zadar, Rijeka and Osijek) and three out of 14 polytechnics and schools of professional higher education (the Polytechnic of Karlovac, the Polytechnic of Zagreb and the Lavoslav Ružička Polytechnic of Vukovar) chose the goal of "Facilitating access to studies and to study support for students of lower socio-economic status and students with disabilities" as one of their general objectives. As part of this goal, each higher education institution proposed the results they commit to achieve within the term of the agreement, as well as indicators for monitoring results.

In 2015, the former Ministry of Science, Education and Sports signed an agreement with all public higher education institutions (universities, polytechnics and schools of professional higher education) on co-funding the tuition fees of full-time students and the material costs of higher education institutions for the academic years 2015/2016, 2016/2017 and 2017/2018. One of the mandatory general objectives of this agreement was ensuring equal access to higher education for all full-time students in Croatia, including facilitating access to studies for students with disabilities. To achieve the aforementioned objective, higher education institutions agree with student representatives to define results/indicators and the share of funds to be spent on facilitating access to studies for students with disabilities. This share varies from one higher education institution to another, ranging from 15% (at University North) to 0.2% (at the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek).²⁸ It would be useful to gain insight into the use of these funds for

academic years 2012/2013, 2013/2014 and 2014/2015, https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2012_08_90_2085.html
Decision of the Government of the Republic of Croatia on fully subsidising tuition fees for full-time students and co-funding the material costs of higher education institutions in Croatia in the academic years 2015/2016, 2016/2017 and 2017/2018, https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2015_07_83_1594.html

27 www.uniri.hr

28 The University of Zadar, the Polytechnic of Zagreb and the Polytechnic of Šibenik plan to spend **2%**; the Polytechnic of Karlovac **1.5%**; the University of Dubrovnik, the Juraj Dobrila University of Pula, the University of Zagreb, the Polytechnic of Međimurje, the Nikola Tesla Polytechnic in

students with disabilities and to assess their effectiveness.

ACTION GUIDELINES:

- Analyse the effectiveness of funds spent from funding agreements for the purpose of facilitating access to studies for students with disabilities and continue funding such activities as required

Providing grants for students with disabilities

Various sources of grants are available to students with disabilities to financially support them during their studies. At the national level, the Ministry of Science and Education²⁹ awards state grants to full-time students enrolled in university or professional studies each year along with partial tuition-fee subsidies for students with disabilities enrolled in postgraduate studies. Before the academic year 2012/2013, a certain number of grants were also intended for students with disabilities attending undergraduate, graduate and integrated university study programmes and professional and specialist graduate professional study programmes (as a part of a special category of the competition published by the Ministry). The Ministry has since delegated the process of awarding these grants to the National Foundation for the Support of Student Living Standards,³⁰ which also awards grants to students enrolled in university and professional studies each year, and the number of grants for students with disabilities has increased. In the academic year 2014/2015, 60 students with disabilities were receiving a monthly grant of HRK 1000 through the National Foundation.³¹ In the academic year 2015/2016, the same amount of grants were awarded, however, the competition was only announced near the end of the academic year (the call was open from 13 till 28 June 2016), which raises the question of whether this method of providing grants to students with disabilities makes any sense.

Moreover, several higher education institutions also allocate a certain number of grants to students with disabilities within their regular grant schemes.

As a part of the grant competition of the University of Zagreb, students with disabilities are able to apply for all competition categories: excellence (A), socioeconomic status (B) and disability (C). In the academic year 2014/2015, the competition had three categories: A–excellence, B–STEM and C–grants for students of under-represented groups (C1–students with disabilities, C2–students without appropriate parental care and C3–single parent students). The University of Zagreb also offers a certain number of grants to students with specific learning difficulties (dyslexia) within the category for students with disabilities.

The student grant competition of the University of Osijek consists of four competition categories: A–excellence, B–active athletes, C–students in need (C1–students of lower socioeconomic status, C2–students with disabilities, C3–students belonging to potentially vulnerable groups) and D–temporary support for students in need. Students with disabilities can also apply for all other competition categories.

As part of the student grant competition of the University of Rijeka, students with disabilities are able to apply to all competition categories: a) grants for graduate study programmes; b) grants for under-represented groups of students; c) grants for STEM/IT; d) grants for foreigners. Within the grants for under-represented groups of students, there are five sub-categories: A–social status, B–students with one or more deceased parents, C–students whose parents have a lower level of education, D–student parents, E–students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are also allowed to apply for a competition for awarding grants based on excellence. In addition to the aforementioned grants, students with disabilities are allowed to

Gospić, the Polytechnic of Požega and the Professional Health School of Zagreb **1%**; the University of Rijeka and the University of Split **0.5%**; while other higher education institutions plan on spending the following share of funds on students with a lower socioeconomic status and students with disabilities: the Marko Marulić Polytechnic of Knin (3%); the Polytechnic of Rijeka (3%); the Polytechnic of Slavonski Brod (2.5%); the Lavoslav Ružička Polytechnic of Vukovar (2%); the Virovitica College (2%) and Križevci College of Agriculture (2%).

29 www.mzo.hr

30 www.nzpuss.hr

31 http://www.stipendije.info/hr/natjecaji/stipendije_nacionalne_zaklade_za_potporu_ucenicom_i_studentskom_standardu

apply to the “Solidarity” grant competition of the Aleksandar Abramov Foundation, which includes two categories: a) covering study costs for low-income students; and b) supporting students of lower socio-economic status or with a serious medical condition (including students without parents, students whose parents are unemployed, students with disabilities and students with serious medical conditions). At the same time, the University of Rijeka also has a competition for awarding a one-time cash prize to the most successful student with disabilities, at the initiative of the Office for Students with Disabilities. This grant is awarded as part of the celebration of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

The Juraj Dobrila University of Pula is working on the development of a general document for granting financial support to students with disabilities in the form of a grant or a one-off bursary.

Although some local and regional government units award a certain number of grants to students with disabilities as part of their regular grant programmes,³² the grant amounts they provide differ greatly. The City of Zagreb, which announces a special competition for awarding grants to students with disabilities each year, provides an example of good practice:³³ in the academic year 2015/2016, the City of Zagreb awarded 12 grants to students with disabilities in the amount of 50% of the average net salary in the City of Zagreb for the period from January to August 2015,³⁴ which amounts to HRK 3200 a month.³⁵

Foundations providing grants to certain groups of students with disabilities also play an important role. For instance, the Marko Brkić Foundation for the Education of the Blind³⁶ provides grants to students with visual impairments.

Within the Erasmus international student exchange programme, students with disabilities are entitled to an increased grant amount due to objectively higher costs according to their specific needs. According to data of the Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes,³⁷ two students in 2014 and five students in 2015 applied for such additional financial support and received it. It should be noted that these data refer exclusively to students who requested this form of support – if students with disabilities participated in the Erasmus programme, but did not request such support, no records are kept regarding their disability.

As can be seen, a large number of grants are available to students with disabilities, which certainly motivates them to enrol in higher education. However, this does not necessarily entail that each recipient of a grant will be successful in their studies, i.e. that each will complete their studies and further enrol in the next higher education level. Certain students see grants as a way of resolving their social or financial difficulties, which was not the intention behind these grant schemes. It may therefore be useful to also introduce a criterion of study progress in addition to physical impairment or disability in order to receive a grant.

Moreover, it would also be practical to centralise student grant competitions intended for students with disabilities (that are awarded from public sources). By doing so, the criteria for receiving grants could be unified and clearer, while grant amounts could be more harmonised.

ACTION GUIDELINES:

- Continue awarding grants to students with disabilities
- Introduce an additional criterion of study progress (at least 30 ECTS credits earned in the previous academic year, with the exception of first-year undergraduates) for awarding grants to students with disabilities in addition to the criterion of the determined degree of physical

32 www.stipendije.info

33 www.zagreb.hr

34 http://www.zagreb.hr/UserDocImages/GZ_natjecaj_stipendije_STUDENTI_VL_174x169.jpg

35 <http://www.tportal.hr/tema/?keywords=prosje%C4%8Dna+pla%C4%87a>

36 <http://www.savez-slijepih.hr/hr/kategorija/zaklada-marko-brkic-17/>

37 <http://www.mobilnost.hr/>

- impairment or the existence of another disability, impairment, disorder or difficulty
- Centralise student grant competitions for students with disabilities awarded from public sources

Adapting teaching practices and providing specialised training for teaching staff, professional staff and administrative staff

Students with disabilities, depending on the nature of their impairment or difficulty, may find it hard to attend classes or to keep up during classes. They are therefore entitled to certain adjustments, including the use of assistive technology. Flexibility in teaching thus becomes an important characteristic of teaching staff, who need to make their classes stimulating and accessible to all students (Ensuring Minimum Accessibility Standards for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education, 2012).

The results of a qualitative research study entitled “Perceptions of Higher Education Teaching Practices Accessible to Students with Disabilities” indicate that the elements that are helpful to teaching staff working with students with disabilities are timely information about the participation of students with disabilities in the teaching process, supervision and additional training for teaching staff to acquire competences for planning and carrying out classes accessible to students with disabilities (Fajdetić et al., 2013). Such trainings are provided at most universities and some polytechnics and schools of professional higher education.

The process of training teaching staff, professional staff and administrative staff on working with students with disabilities and on the ways of adapting the academic environment to their capabilities started at Croatian universities as a part of the Tempus EduQuality³⁸ project. A total of 22 persons from all Croatian universities (six from the University of Zagreb, three from the universities of Rijeka, Zadar, Osijek and Split and two from the universities of Dubrovnik and Pula) have been trained to conduct such training workshops themselves.³⁹ These newly-trained trainers are staff who are involved in the work of the university support services for students with disabilities or otherwise involved with students with disabilities and who are interested in conducting workshops. In the academic year 2011/2012, the trainers started conducting two-day workshops for teaching staff and one-day workshops for professional and administrative staff at their own universities. The plan is for the trainers to continue conducting workshops as an integral part of support services for students with disabilities, and this step has been completed at the University of Zagreb. A total of 75 teachers from 26 constituent units have been trained at the University of Zagreb, including coordinators for students with disabilities, vice-deans for education, student support coordinators, heads of departments and heads of institutes, as well as members of quality assurance committees and boards. Furthermore, 99 members of professional and administrative staff from 24 constituent units have been educated, as well as representatives of the university’s rectorate and student centre – including heads and employees of student services, libraries and international relations offices, ISVU coordinators, administrative and IT officers and department secretaries.

In addition, as a part of the Tempus EduQuality project, educational manuals were created, printed and distributed to all constituent units of universities in Croatia. Intended for teaching, professional and administrative staff, the set of eight manuals covered the following thematic areas: general guidelines; spatial accessibility; access to information and services; teaching and learning outcomes; mentoring and consultation; international student mobility; free time; and psychosocial needs of students. The manuals include a number of practical and concrete guidelines about working with students with disabilities and

38 www.eduquality-hr.com

39 “Training of trainers”

about the possibilities of academic adjustments (Ensuring Minimum Accessibility Standards for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education, 2012).

When adopting alternative teaching methods, techniques, forms and materials, care must be taken to not compromise academic standards, which are the educational goals for each level of education. This responsibility lies with teaching staff (Kiš-Glavaš, 2012). On one hand, they need to adapt their teaching process to all students, including students with disabilities, in order to ensure that the defined learning outcomes are acquired. On the other hand, they have to be careful not to be too lenient towards students with disabilities, because this kind of approach will not ensure the achievement of the set learning outcomes and will negatively affect the students' acquisition of professional competences. According to research by Doolan et al. (2015), which was conducted with focus groups of students with disabilities in Zadar and Rijeka, it was highlighted that students find it important that teaching staff do not have double standards when grading students with disabilities. Some teaching staff, however, fear that they may be too lenient towards students with disabilities because they feel sorry for them (Fajdetić et al., 2013), although they are aware that they should not misuse learning outcomes by reducing the curriculum content that students with disabilities are expected to master. Moreover, they point out the existence of difficulties in relation to setting adaptation limits, e.g. teaching foreign languages or music culture to deaf students and especially in relation to students with mental impairments for whom they are not sure whether they will be able to adequately fulfil their future work commitments, especially if they are expected to work with children or vulnerable groups.

The results of research by Urbanc et al. (2014) show that there are certain students with disabilities who tend to take advantage of their disability status in order to make it easier for themselves to master their study obligations. It has been shown that students with disabilities have different experiences relating to the acceptance of their own disability and their relationship with it. They range from disability as a factor contributing to their personal psychological resilience when faced with various problems, to disability as a factor that contributes to the development of ineffective patterns of behaviour such as learned helplessness.

Other qualitative research that was conducted with a group of students with disabilities has shown that students are mostly satisfied with the support system provided by university teaching staff. Students with disabilities consider that their teachers treat them equally to other students, that they respect their abilities and that they are willing to adjust student requirements and obligations in the academic environment (Milić Babić, Dowling, 2015).

ACTION GUIDELINES:

- Introduce mandatory and timely informing of teaching staff about the enrolment of students with disabilities in their course so that they have enough time to make teaching adjustments
- Carry out mandatory trainings for teaching, professional and administrative staff at higher education institutions on the capabilities of students with different forms of disability and on the ways of adapting academic content to their capabilities without compromising academic standards

Ensuring adapted assessment of acquired competences

Certain higher education institutions provide individualised ways of taking examinations (and tests) for students with disabilities in order to provide them with the same opportunities as other students to present the competences that they have acquired. Adjustments include, for instance, extended time for taking examinations, changing examination dates, taking examinations several times, oral examinations instead of written examinations (or vice versa), enlarged print and use of personal computers. Students who have such a need substantiate their request with relevant documents, while teaching staff pay attention not to compromise academic standards or the defined learning outcomes. The option of individualised

examinations is offered to students at the universities of Zagreb, Rijeka, Osijek, Dubrovnik and Zadar, as well as at certain polytechnics and schools of professional higher education. Such adjustments are organised based on recommendations of the university support services for students with disabilities (through offices for students with disabilities at universities of Zagreb, Rijeka and Osijek; through the expert council of the University of Dubrovnik; and through the counselling centre and committee for students with disabilities at the University of Zadar). The right of students with disabilities to take individualised examinations was legally regulated by the University of Osijek in July 2015 by the introduction of Article 59, paragraph 4 into the new Regulation on studies and studying at the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek: "Scientific/artistic constituent units that carry out teaching are required to provide an adapted approach for addressing the specific needs of students with disabilities when taking examinations".

When taking examinations and other methods of assessment, students with disabilities are required to demonstrate how well they have achieved the learning outcomes prescribed by the study programme. In this process, they should not be treated leniently in any way nor should the expectations of teaching staff and, consequently, academic standards be lowered. As mentioned above, however, this is not always the case (Fajdetić et al. 2013). Qualitative research conducted in 2015 with a group of nine students with disabilities shows that students with disabilities point out that teachers sometimes lowered the requirements and reduced the scope of the curriculum that they were expected to master. This kind of discrepancy in the criteria is therefore seen by the students as an endangerment of learning outcomes and can be considered as a form of discrimination in the higher education system (Bačani et al., 2015). At one of Croatia's polytechnics, it is even stated that students with disabilities are "exempt from taking a part of the examination or the examination altogether".

ACTION GUIDELINES:

- Higher education teaching staff should be provided with additional training to strengthen their understanding of their responsibility in the process of ensuring that the defined competences are acquired by all students, including students with disabilities, and that the acquisition of these competences is properly assessed

Peer support and/or educational assistance

The university course "Peer Support for Students with Disabilities", which was introduced as an elective course at the universities of Zagreb, Rijeka and Pula as a part of the Tempus EduQuality project, offers an important form of support in class for students with disabilities. The University of Zagreb was the first higher education institution to introduce the course in the academic year 2011/2012 and 48 students have since taken and completed the course at that university. Students from all constituent units of the university and all study levels (undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate) are able to enrol in the course. The course helps students with disabilities to get the support they need in the academic environment from peer assistants. Depending on the type of difficulty/impairment, the support can include: help in arriving to the faculty and in accessing classrooms, cabinets, libraries, student service offices, student canteens, etc.; support in administrative procedures; support in taking notes in class; verbal description of visually presented content; support in different social situations such as mediation in communication; and personal support as needed, such as assistance when using the toilet and so on.

As an alternative to this course, a phenomenon of so-called "educational assistance" is increasingly emerging as the predominant solution for providing opportunities to students with disabilities at the universities of Zagreb, Rijeka and Pula (which also offer the course "Peer Support for Students with Disabilities"). Unfortunately, this is an inappropriate form of support because "educational" assistance should not be offered in higher education to assist learning and the fulfilment of study obligations, because this risks preventing students with disabilities from appropriately and fully acquiring professional competences independently. Peer support puts emphasis on the support and not assistance, i.e. support is provided to students with disabilities as a way of equalising opportunities and allowing students to fulfil their study obligations with maximum independence. In addition, educational assistance is a form of paid

assistance without systematic preparation (i.e. training of student assistants) and the major flaw of this form of assistance is that it is not accompanied by systematic monitoring or evaluation. Peer support, on the other hand, is provided free of charge and students undergo a 45-hour training (15 hours of lectures and 30 hours of exercises), followed by a systematic 30-hour supervision over two weeks. Mandatory course evaluation is also conducted and, if required by the students involved, additional workshops can be introduced, while module coordinators and their associates are available 24/7 in case of unforeseen circumstances. Students with disabilities themselves are also involved in some classes. In addition, by signing the support plan for the term, both parties (the student assistant and the student with a disability) are obliged to adhere to provide/receive the support they agreed upon and also to full cooperation.

In addition to the above, the evaluation results for the course “Peer Support for Students with Disabilities” speak in favour of its effectiveness and success. The outcomes of the course include gaining a greater awareness about students with disabilities, acquiring the competences to provide peer support, achieving increased readiness and certainty for advocating the rights of students with disabilities and being able to adapt to and contemplate ethical issues in relation to peer support in the academic and wider social environment (Ferić Šlehan et al., 2013). The results point to the conclusion that this way of achieving equal opportunities for all students with disabilities in the system of higher education is effective and mutually beneficial. Alternative forms of assistance such as “educational assistance” should therefore be the exception and not the rule and can only be applied in situations when it is not possible to introduce peer support or when there is a need for a greater total number of hours of direct support than can be provided through peer support (5 hours a week), along with obligatory training, supervision and evaluation of the work of assistants for students with disabilities. In addition, it should be noted that most students with disabilities also have the right to the provision of personal assistance⁴⁰ if they apply to the competition of the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy through the civil sector, so this assistance should also be introduced into the academic environment if necessary.

ACTION GUIDELINES:

- Introduce mandatory training, supervision and evaluation of the work of assistants for students with disabilities
- Offer the course “Peer Support for Students with Disabilities” at all higher education levels and leave the training of trainers to experts from the universities of Zagreb, Rijeka and Pula, since they have already undergone this training and are experienced in conducting such workshops

Ensuring spatial accessibility

The spatial accessibility of higher education institutions is a basic prerequisite for providing access to higher education to students with motor disorders. The results of a recently conducted study show that students with motor disorders (who use wheelchairs) are most satisfied with the support system compared to other groups of students with disabilities (Kiš-Glavaš, 2014). This is most probably the result of the students’ positive perception of the substantial improvement of spatial accessibility in general, including at higher education institutions (Bačani et al., 2015).

Many constituent units of the universities of Zagreb, Rijeka, Osijek and Split have made great efforts to ensure spatial accessibility for students with disabilities (construction of ramps, lifts, moving walks, toilets for students with disabilities, tactile paving and Braille signs). At the University of Zadar, all physical barriers have been removed and access for persons with motor disorders has been secured at all buildings of the university.⁴¹ Many polytechnics and schools of professional higher education have also taken substantial steps to ensure that all areas are accessible to persons with disabilities.

40 <http://www.mdomsp.gov.hr/istaknute-teme/natjecaji-udruga-zaposljavanje-eu-fondovi/1696>

41 <http://www.unizd.hr/Default.aspx?alias=www.unizd.hr/studentisinvaliditetom&>

As a part of the Tempus EduQuality project, a manual on spatial accessibility⁴² was also developed. A list of criteria for determining spatial accessibility was enclosed with it, offering an estimation of the existing spatial accessibility and proposals for spatial solutions.

ACTION GUIDELINES:

- Continue with the improvement of spatial accessibility of higher education institutions

Providing adapted transport

Adapted transport represents a major challenge for students with disabilities who have limited mobility. Public city transport is mostly not adapted and even in cases where such a service is available (for instance, in Zagreb) access to the vehicles themselves is still not completely adapted. Some students with disabilities therefore use adapted vans – but there are not enough of them to serve the high demand, since they are mainly owned by civil society organisations for persons with disabilities. In Zagreb, the city's public transport service also owns this kind of vehicle. [In accordance with the Regulation on the transport of persons with disabilities](#),⁴³ the transport services may only be used by persons with disabilities who need a wheelchair to move and by persons with severe motor disorders. The requirement that regular users (those who use transport services at least once a month) determine the travel date and route no later than one day earlier and occasional users at least three days earlier represents a problem for students. Considering factors such as occasional schedule changes, breaks between lectures, unplanned consultations and other student obligations, this form of transport is too rigid and impractical for some students with disabilities. Students end up spending a lot of their time waiting for transport that is seldom possible to access at the exact requested time because of the difficulties concerning its organisation. In addition, up until the summer term of the academic year 2015/2016, this service was also deficient because only students with disabilities with a permanent residence in the City of Zagreb were entitled to it, whereas students from other cities with a temporary residence in the City of Zagreb could not use it. Some students therefore use transport organised by the "Zamisli" Association for the Promotion of Quality Education of Youth with Disabilities,⁴⁴ which owns two adapted vans and a special service for organising such transport. Some of the University of Zagreb's constituent units fund this transport service for their students directly through the university's funding agreements with the Ministry, while others have stopped using the service due to dissatisfaction with its quality and have hence sought an alternative solution. For example, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Zagreb entered into an adapted transport agreement with a private transport company.⁴⁵

Although Rijeka's public city transport is also not adapted for persons with disabilities, such a service is organised by the municipal transport company⁴⁶ in cooperation with the City of Rijeka's Administration Department of Health and Social Welfare. However, this transport service does not connect to all higher education institutions in the city, so many students cannot use it to reach their place of study. The University of Rijeka's Office for Students with Disabilities therefore entered into an agreement for funding the transport for students with disabilities with the "Znam" Association for Youth and Students with Disabilities of the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County,⁴⁷ which owns an adapted van. However, some problems still remain related to the strict timetable and the deterioration of the van. This transport service for students with disabilities is funded by the City of Rijeka, the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County and the University of Rijeka.

42 http://www.eduquality-hr.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=107&Itemid=48&lang=hr

43 <http://web1.zagreb.hr/default.aspx?id=21329>

44 www.zamisli.hr

45 <http://www.ibus.hr/>

46 <http://www.autotrolej.hr/default.asp?ru=125>

47 www.udruga-znam.hr/pgz/

In Osijek, efforts have also been made to address the problem of inadequate public transport at the local community level through adopting a special regulation on the transport of persons with disabilities. The regulation consists of an agreement concluded between the City of Osijek and the city transport company⁴⁸ to provide persons with disabilities with an adapted van. However, the strict timetable is a major challenge for students who do not have a fixed class schedule.

The City of Pula subsidises the price of city transport for persons with disabilities in accordance with the Decision on Social Welfare, and a local transport company owns several adapted buses that are used by persons with disabilities.

The University of Zadar has signed an agreement with the county, the local government and civil society organisations for the provision of transport services to persons with disabilities.

These kinds of initiatives do not exist at the local community level in other cities with polytechnics and schools of professional higher education.

The Ministry of Science and Education partially subsidises transport costs for full-time students with disabilities enrolled in university and professional studies (including at the postgraduate level) and that have a determined degree of physical impairment that is 60% or above.⁴⁹ In the academic year 2015/2016, the subsidy for students receiving this form of support was HRK 1000,⁵⁰ the same as in the academic year 2014/2015. This amount, however, is too low in view of the higher transport costs for students with disabilities who cannot use public city transport. Namely, students who are unable to use adapted vans (provided by the public city transport service or civil society organisations) often organise their transport on their own by taking a taxi, which entails higher costs. On the other hand, all students whose determined degree of physical impairment is 60% or above are entitled to use this support, without checking if they can independently use public city transport services or not. This means that many students who do not need such support are nevertheless provided with subsidies (i.e. students with hearing impairments, visual impairments or physical impairments that do not affect the capability of independent movement, but whose determined percentage of physical impairment is still 60% or more).

Providing adapted transport for all persons with disabilities (including students with disabilities) obviously remains a major challenge in Croatia. For this reason, one proposed initiative has been to divert funds that are currently being provided individually to students with disabilities by the Ministry of Science and Education to fund of the transport for all students with disabilities who require such support. In this way, the Ministry would conclude an agreement through a public tender to provide adapted transport for students with disabilities where such transport is most needed.

ACTION GUIDELINES:

- Review the profile of recipients of the financial support provided by the Ministry of Science and Education for adapted transport of students with disabilities
- Reallocate the funds of the Ministry of Science and Education for adapted transport of students with disabilities to those students who cannot independently use public city transport by concluding an agreement between the Ministry and the best service-provider at the local community level where such a service is required

Providing adapted accommodation

48 <http://www.osijek.hr/index.php/cro/Povjerenstvo-za-OSI/Generalni-servis>

49 Ordinance on the conditions and the eligibility of full-time students with disabilities to financial support for co-funding transport costs, Official Gazette No. 23/15

50 In accordance with the Decision on the amount of financial support for co-funding transport costs for full-time students with disabilities. See <https://mzo.hr/hr/rubrike/studentski-standard>

According to national regulations on access to subsidised student accommodation,⁵¹ students with categories of disability from 1 to 5 (physical impairment greater than 50%), including students with disabilities enrolled in postgraduate university studies, are entitled to directly obtain a place in student residence halls. Students with disabilities with categories of disability from 6 to 10 (physical impairment up to 50%) earn extra points. However, the regulations do not define the criteria for losing the entitlement to direct accommodation for this group of students, which may lead to a lack of accommodation capacity for newly enrolled students who also have this entitlement.

Regarding the level of adaptation of accommodation for students with disabilities, all the newly-built student residence halls are mostly accessible to students with disabilities, while older residence halls, unfortunately, are not. The “Cvjetno naselje” student residence hall in Zagreb, the new student residence hall in Osijek, the student residence hall in Varaždin and the student residence hall in Zadar should be highlighted as examples of good practice. The Student Centre of the University of Zagreb⁵² has 31 rooms in total that are adapted for students who use a wheelchair and six rooms that are adapted for students with limited mobility, while blind students are accommodated in single rooms. The refurbishment of certain student residence halls is also underway and a number of rooms will be adapted for students who use a wheelchair: the “Cvjetno naselje” student residence hall will adapt 19 more rooms in the second pavilion in addition to the existing 19 adapted rooms; and the “Stjepan Radić” student residence hall will also adapt a number of rooms in addition to the existing ones. It can therefore be concluded that the number of adapted rooms is rising.

At the University of Rijeka, the construction of new accommodation is underway within the campus. It will include a number of rooms that are fully adapted for students with disabilities, in which students are expected to move into in the academic year 2016/2017.

At the University of Osijek, the construction of a new wing of the student residence hall is planned. The number of spatially adapted rooms will thus further increase from the existing number of such rooms (seven out of 250 rooms). Funds have also been secured for the refurbishment of the old student residence hall “Ivan Goran Kovačić”, which will result in four additional adapted single rooms for students with disabilities.

The construction of the student residence hall in Pula has been completed and it housed students for the first time in the academic year 2015/2016. The residence hall is completely adapted for students with disabilities: there are four rooms that are adapted for students with disabilities (i.e. six beds), including adapted toilets and kitchen facilities.

In the student residence hall at the University of Zadar, four rooms with eight beds in total are reserved for students with disabilities. The plan is to build a new university campus and a new student residence hall to increase accommodation for students with disabilities.

Other higher education institutions have yet to start addressing the issue.

An additional challenge that needs to be addressed for students with severe physical disabilities who are already housed in student residence halls is the lack of a systematic form of assistance to meet their everyday needs. At this moment, the issue is only being temporarily addressed at the University of Zagreb, which since 2009 organises and funds a service for providing assistance to students with disabilities who are housed in student residence halls. As a part of this service, nine full-time students have been hired to provide 24/7 assistance to students with disabilities in meeting their everyday needs, by working in

51 (1) Decision of the former Ministry of Science, Education and Sports on the criteria for allocating places in the student dormitories of the student centres in the Republic of Croatia, <http://www.sczg.unizg.hr/smjestaj/smjestaj/kriteriji-za-raspodjelu-mjesta/>

(2) Ordinance on the conditions and eligibility of full-time students to subsidised accommodation in the Republic of Croatia (which the Ministry issues every year) https://mzo.hr/sites/default/files/migrated/pravilnik_smjestaj_lipan_j_2016.pdf

52 www.sczg.hr

shifts throughout the year (assistance in maintaining hygiene, feeding, movement, tidying, performing administrative tasks, etc.). The funds assigned for this purpose are provided from the own income of the university, including through income from tuition fees. The temporarily solution has only been implemented at the University of Zagreb, but not at other Croatian higher education institutions, where students with disabilities face the same challenge.

The challenges described above obviously relate to the needs of students with severe and complex physical impairments, who need assistance and care to perform everyday activities in order to then fulfil their study obligations. Such needs of persons with disabilities in Croatia are addressed through a measure of the Social Welfare Act (Official Gazette No. 33/12) that entitles persons with severe disabilities living at home to receive home-based help and care services. This entitlement encompasses preparing meals, carry out housework, maintaining personal hygiene and performing other everyday activities, which is exactly what the assistance for students with disabilities who are accommodated in student residence halls consists of. The fact that the student residence hall is a temporary residence for students with disabilities should not be an obstacle to their eligibility for home care. However, according to the Social Welfare Act (Official Gazette No. 33/12), home help and care must be conducted by social welfare centres based in the place of permanent residence of the user. In addition, since students with disabilities who are housed in student residence halls are all located in the same section of the building (in order to facilitate the organisation of assistance to students, not to create a "ghetto"), the existing 24/7 assistance measure could be an economical joint solution considering the larger number of students. It is reasonable to expect that such a service could be systematically funded by the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy.

ACTION GUIDELINES:

- Continue increasing the accommodation capacity for students with disabilities in student residence halls
- Secure funds for providing assistance to students with a severe physical disability to meet their everyday needs through the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy

Obligations of students with disabilities

According to results of the qualitative research "Perceptions of Higher Education Teaching Practices Accessible to Students with Disabilities", young university teaching staff consider that the rights of students with disabilities are guaranteed and form an integral part of the higher education system in Croatia, and that students also have an obligation to achieve the expected and planned learning outcomes of a given study programme (Fajdetić et al., 2013). In particular, teaching staff consider that "*students with disabilities themselves play an extremely important role in terms of facing their personal problems, taking responsibility for themselves, taking necessary steps, exercising and ensuring their rights, assuming their student responsibilities and fulfilling their obligations*" (Fajdetić et al., 2013, p. 36). Research by Urbanc et al. (2014) also points to the importance of the responsibility of students with disabilities and the reality of their expectations as prerequisites for successful studying.

Research by Bačani et al. (2015) shows that students with disabilities stress the responsibility of persons with disabilities themselves in their struggle to claim their own rights and to achieve an equal status in society, which can be achieved through active participation in everyday social life.

Most students with disabilities are indeed responsible. The problem is that the existing student support system can provide perverse incentives to certain students with disabilities. Namely, there is now a hyper-production and broad availability of a highly varied (and sometimes highly unnecessary) set of compensatory measures according to a principle of "everything for everyone" (e.g. exempting students with disabilities from physical education classes, providing lecture notes for students who anyway receive all teaching materials in advance, recording lectures for deaf students). This leads to a situation in which certain students with disabilities lose their motivation for studying and try instead to solve other social

problems (financial, housing, cultural, etc.) by studying and taking advantage of the benefits that they are entitled to as students (with disabilities). The results of research by Urbanc et al. (2014) show that certain students with disabilities are mainly motivated to enrol in higher education due to the poorly-adapted environment of their original place of residence, regardless of their personal preferences and motivation to study. Instead, studying serves primarily as an opportunity to gain more independence in a larger city (e.g. leaving their family, being more independent and free in their movements around the city, accessing adapted transport, having less social control and a having a greater possibility for self-determination). According to this group of qualitative research participants (consisting of 20 students with disabilities from the universities of Zagreb, Osijek, Rijeka and Zadar), studying represented for some students the only way to “get away” from their parents and to experience a more independent life, owing to the lack of support in smaller towns or villages.

Higher education should under no circumstances serve exclusively as a means to meet such needs of youth with disabilities – other measures and activities should be implemented to that end. For this reason, it should be insisted upon that all students with disabilities who make use of the benefits that they are entitled to must also fulfil their student obligations.

ACTION GUIDELINES:

- A student performance criterion should be included in the implementation of positive discrimination measures

IMPLEMENTATION OF MEASURES

The analysis above provided the basis for defining measures for enhancing the support system for students with disabilities. This process was led by the National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education and the measures were based on recommendations from a previous national document entitled “Ensuring Minimum Accessibility Standards for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia” (2012). The measures are stated in the form of a self-assessment list for higher education institutions that evaluates the level of development of the support system for students with disabilities.

Measure 6.4.2 Adapt the procedures for application and enrolment at higher education institutions for persons with disabilities. All necessary information about enrolment in higher education institutions should be equally accessible to persons with disabilities.

- Information on the higher education institution, study programmes and studying conditions is published on the website of each higher education institution, including information on spatial accessibility, available forms of support and benefits for students with disabilities, e.g. entitlement to enrolment priority; to individualised assessment of knowledge, skills and competences; adjustments in class and adapted assessment of acquired competences; peer support; adapted transport and accommodation; grants and subsidising study costs; and contact information of the competent services and persons.
(Responsible institutions: higher education institutions, student centres, student residence halls)
- E-content on official websites of higher education institutions is also accessible to students with disabilities. Guidelines on e-information accessibility by the World Wide Web Consortium—W3C⁵³ are applied.
(Responsible institutions: higher education institutions through institutional services and professional bodies for providing support to students with disabilities, constituent units of higher education institutions, CARNet, E-learning Centre SRCE)
- Staff responsible for the management of websites of higher education institutions have been educated according to the rules on e-accessibility.

- (Responsible institutions: CARNet, E-learning Centre SRCE)
- Forms for application, enrolment and other institutional purposes are modelled based on recommendations regarding easy-to-read formats⁵⁴ and are available in electronic form.
(Responsible institutions: higher education institutions, student centres, student residence halls)
- Applicants with disabilities are further informed and consulted on which study programme to choose based on cooperation with support services for students with disabilities.
(Responsible institutions: institutional support services and professional bodies for students with disabilities, coordinators for students with disabilities, study programme directors and vice-deans for education)
- Applicants with disabilities who are entitled to priority enrol or to enrol outside the quota have a recommendation from the institutional support service for students with disabilities at the higher education institution to which they are applying.
- Individualised additional assessments of knowledge, skills and competences for students with disabilities are implemented systematically (e.g. providing extended time for solving written assignments, conducting oral instead of written assessments of knowledge and vice versa, enlarged print), depending on the type of impairment.
(Responsible institutions: institutional support services and professional bodies for students with disabilities, constituent units of higher education institutions)

Measure 6.4.3 Adjust approaches to teaching and to the assessment of knowledge, skills and abilities for students with disabilities, and enable them to demonstrate their acquisition of defined learning outcomes in an equitable way. Organise relevant training for teaching staff.

- Teaching, professional and administrative staff of the higher education institution have been trained for working with and providing support to students with disabilities.
(Responsible institutions: higher education institutions through institutional support services and professional bodies for students with disabilities, offices for quality assurance in higher education)
- Timely and mandatory informing of relevant teaching staff about the enrolment of students with disabilities in their course, so that they have enough time to make teaching adjustments.
- Teaching materials are made available to students before the beginning of the term and deadlines for their publication are incorporated in the rules and regulations of study programmes.
(Responsible institutions: higher education institutions)
- If necessary, lectures can be audio-recorded with the consent of teaching staff.
(Responsible institutions: higher education institutions)
- Various forms of e-learning and digital repositories of teaching materials are also made available.
(Responsible institutions: higher education institutions)
- In some forms of teaching (e.g. laboratory classes involving handling chemicals, electronic devices, etc.) a personal assistant can be present and peer-support can be provided.
(Responsible institutions: Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy, higher education institutions)
- Alternative content for certain forms of teaching (e.g. field classes) has been introduced.
(Responsible institutions: higher education institutions)
- The use of computers in teaching and the availability of typists, sign-language interpreters and communication intermediaries is provided where necessary and justified.
(Responsible institutions: higher education institutions, civil society organisations)
- In accordance with Article 86 of the Copyright and Related Rights Act (Official Gazette Nos. 79/97, 167/03), digitised class materials or other acceptable formats of materials available to students with visual impairments and students with reading difficulties have been provided (other acceptable formats of materials include audio books, easy-read books, audio newspapers and audio magazines, video/DVD books with subtitles and/or sign language, Braille books and

54 <http://www.hkdrustvo.hr/hkdnovosti/clanak/380>

enlarged print books).

(Responsible institutions: higher education institutions through institutional support services and professional bodies for students with disabilities, constituent units of higher education institutions, library heads, CARNet, E-learning Centre SRCE)⁵⁵

- Students with disabilities sign an agreement with their higher education institution on the individual usage of audio recordings of lectures and/or digitalised copies of the teaching material, including particular responsibilities of the student and disciplinary measures listed in case of unauthorised distribution of the aforementioned material.
- Higher education institutions, in cooperation with their institutional support services (i.e. a professional body for providing support to students with disabilities), adopt the Recommendations for Individualised Methods of Following Classes and Taking Examinations. The documents serving as evidence that a given student with disabilities is in need of adaptations is delivered in person or scanned via e-mail to the Office for Students with Disabilities or to the competent person at the higher education institution, who then sends the recommendation in writing to the student, the vice-dean for education and the coordinator for students with disabilities. The student can activate the recommendation when required by personally addressing each teaching staff member and in accordance with the vice-dean and the coordinator.

(Responsible institutions: higher education institutions through institutional services and professional bodies for providing support to students with disabilities)

- Individualised additional assessments of knowledge, skills and competences for students with disabilities are implemented systematically (e.g. providing extended time for solving written assignments, conducting oral instead of written assessments of knowledge and vice versa, enlarged print).

(Responsible institutions: constituent units of higher education institutions, teachers, institutional support services for students with disabilities)

Measure 6.4.5 Ensure the operation of institutional support services and professional bodies for students with disabilities.

- An appropriate form of institutional support for students with disabilities has been provided in the form of a service/office/competent person at the higher education institution, in line with the needs and specificities of each institution.
(Responsible institutions: higher education institutions and their constituent units, supported by the Ministry of Science and Education).
- Adequate resources (especially human resources) and operating conditions are ensured for services/offices/competent persons for students with disabilities at higher education institutions in order to ensure the availability of staff that can address uncertainties/additional questions, provide regular and timely information and implement other activities supporting students with disabilities.
(Responsible institutions: Ministry of Science and Education, higher education institutions)
- Coordinators or commissioners and student representatives responsible for the implementation and evaluation of support systems for students with disabilities at the level of constituent units and their departments have been appointed, trained and supervised, and their work is positively evaluated.
(Responsible institutions: higher education institutions and their constituent units)
- A student counselling centre has been established at the higher education institution (psychological, career, development of academic and life skills) and is available and adapted to the needs of students with disabilities.
(Responsible institutions: Ministry of Science and Education, higher education institutions)
- The course "Peer Support for Students with Disabilities" is offered each term.
(Responsible institutions: higher education institutions).

55 <http://www.srce.unizg.hr/vijest/prilagodba-sustava-za-e-ucenje-merlin-prema-smjernicama-pristupacnosti-738/>

CONCLUSION

As previously mentioned, the goal of the National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education was to provide guidelines for the implementation of three measures defined in the Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (Official Gazette No. 124/14). This was achieved in the form of a self-assessment list for higher education institutions to evaluate the level of development of the support system for students with disabilities. These provide the minimum standards for addressing key challenges faced by applicants/students with disabilities: the application and enrolment procedure; the adaptation of teaching and of the assessment of acquired knowledge, skills and competences; and the establishment and operation of institutional support services and professional bodies for students with disabilities. Higher education institutions should report to the Ministry of Science and Education or other relevant institutions on this matter each academic year. The provision of this set of support measures should also become one of the mandatory criteria for the evaluation of higher education institutions, i.e. an obligatory criterion in the accreditation and reaccreditation procedure.

However, it will not be possible to fully implement these measures without introducing other measures such as: training primary and secondary school teachers on working with children with developmental problems (as a prerequisite for the adequate preparation of these pupils for enrolling in higher education) or creating and implementing transitional programmes for students with disabilities in the period between graduation to employment. It would also require implementing all the measures that were presented in the first part of this document in the form of guidelines, which can be summarised as follows:

- Implement more intensive public information campaigns, especially towards pupils with developmental problems, on the support and the adjustment system available to students with disabilities in higher education.
- Systematically collect data on students with disabilities receiving forms of support in higher education.
- Ensure systematic evaluation by students with disabilities of the support provided to them by teaching, professional and administrative staff at higher education institutions.
- Expand the definition of students with disabilities who are entitled to different forms of support and benefits in the higher education system.
- Avoid the use of preferential treatment for students with disabilities (apart from exceptional cases), but insist on providing compensatory measures since such measures lead to greater independence of students with disabilities rather than greater dependence.
- Include a performance criterion in the implementation of positive discrimination measures.
- Limit the entitlement of students with disabilities to enrolment priority, i.e. do not allow direct enrolment of students with disabilities who achieved less than 20% below the lowest-ranked applicant who gained the right of full-time enrolment (outside the quota) or to students with disabilities who achieved less than 15% below the lowest-ranked applicant (within the quota).
- Analyse the effectiveness of funds spent from funding agreements related to facilitating access to studies for students with disabilities.
- Introduce an additional performance criterion for awarding grants to students with disabilities, in addition to the current criterion of the determined degree of physical impairment or the existence of another disability, impairment, disorder or difficulty.
- Review the profile of recipients of subsidies from the Ministry of Science and Education for adapted transport of student with disabilities, and reallocate the funds used for these subsidies to support students who cannot independently use public city transport.

- Secure funds for providing assistance to students with severe physical disabilities in meeting their everyday needs through the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy.
- Include the engagement of coordinators, commissioners and other persons providing support to students with disabilities as one of the criteria for promotion into teaching ranks.

The successful implementation of the aforementioned measures depends on strong multi-agency cooperation of a number of institutions that can directly or indirectly affect the equalisation of opportunities of students with disabilities in Croatia.

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