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The right to higher education for refugee students: analysis of higher education policy in the  
Republic of Croatia

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International migrations are not a new phenomenon; however, the movement of people across borders in recent years is becoming more diverse with an increasing impact on educational systems worldwide. The right to education is a fundamental human right for everyone, including refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced persons. Nevertheless, refugees experience limited access to education at all levels, and especially on the higher education level which is often overlooked as it is not mandatory.

This qualitative study relies on reflexive thematic analysis of official higher education policies in a post-socialist and most recent European Union member, the Republic of Croatia, and aims to provide an overview of the social dimension of Croatian higher education with the focus on refugees and refugee-like students in higher education. The research looks at how two higher education policy documents, Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (2014) and National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia 2019 – 2021 (2018) address the right to education for refugees according to the 4A Framework by Katarina Tomaševski. The 4A Framework implies that inclusive education systems ought to be: available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable. The framework was adjusted for the higher education context and expanded with an additional marker of affordability.

The findings show that the Croatian higher education system does not have a standard policy around the inclusion of refugee students. Although there is consistency between the two analysed documents and there have been attempts and adjustments to make higher education more inclusive, policy gaps are detected in the adaptation of curriculum, the language of instruction as well as in recognition of prior learning, and quality of overall higher education reaching the conclusion that there is more that has to be done and given attention to.

Keywords: Refugees, inclusive higher education, policy analysis, human-rights based approach, 4A Framework

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To be completely honest, I started thinking about what to write in this section way before this thesis was finalised and while I was still in Oulu, biking from Toppila to Linnanmaa to spend the day at the University. Starting with that, I want to express my gratitude to all people that the memory of Oulu reminds me of, to the people that made Oulu feels like home and made me realise that Oulu deserves to be called home, even temporarily. I could write another thesis on that and how grateful I am to all of you, but let's keep that for some other time.

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Thank you. Hvala. Merci. σας ευχαριστώ. Gracias. Obrigado. ありがとうございます  
Kiitos.

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For whatever is happening next, I am ready.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

*no one leaves home until home is a sweaty voice in your ear  
saying —  
leave,  
run away from me now  
i don't know what i've become  
but i know that anywhere  
is safer than here*

Home, Warsan Shire (2009)

In this introductory chapter I will start by describing the background of the study, its significance, context, and the research questions this thesis aims to answer. In addition, I also position myself as a researcher and offer introductory reflections on my role. At the end of this chapter, I present an overview of the thesis structure to help in guiding the reader throughout the thesis.

## 1.1 Background of the study

International migrations are not a new phenomenon; however, in recent times, the movement of people across borders is becoming more diverse and complex, with an increasing impact on the educational system (UNESCO, 2018, p. 35). According to Altbach and Bassett (2004, p. 31), the migration of educated people represents a central element of globalization. While for many individuals, student mobility and migration are a proactive decision to create better future opportunities, other students, such as refugee students, are forced to flee their countries for various reasons. According to Sheikh and Anderson (2018, p. 22), migrations are always associated with certain challenges. Nevertheless, in the case of refugees, those challenges are greater as they are usually unprepared for the move and therefore did not have the opportunity to organise places to stay or to work in a recipient country.

Many refugees are eligible for higher education, or they already started studying in their home countries, but their higher education was interrupted (Reinhardt, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, Deribo, Happ, & Nell-Müller, 2018, p. 3). Higher education creates various benefits for society and for individuals. However, these benefits are not evenly shared across the society, particularly among different socio-economic classes (Brown et al., 2016, p. 104). When it comes to the less included groups in the higher education system, a consensus was reached that

these groups cannot be limited to socio-economic or other specific features but rather, those groups have to be identified (Fernell & Kovač, 2010, p. 258). In the document *Underrepresented and Vulnerable Groups in Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia* drafted by the National Group for the Advancement of the Social Dimension of Higher Education (2016, p. 4), underrepresentation in higher education means a lower proportion of a certain group of students who are in the higher education system in relation to the situation in other European countries. In the Croatian context, the following groups were identified as underrepresented: students whose parents have a lower level of education, students in the technical field and students in the humanities, older students, students with children, students belonging to the Roma minority (2016, p. 3). Vulnerable groups of students have a higher risk of exposure to difficulties in academic or social integration and have fewer opportunities for some aspects of the study (such as international mobility). The following groups were identified as vulnerable in the Croatian context: older students, students with disabilities, students with children, students belonging to the Roma minority, students from families of lower economic status, students who have completed vocational education, students who work in addition to studying, LGBTQ+ students, students from alternative care systems, homeless students, students from rural areas, smaller towns and islands, and refugees and asylum seekers (2016, p. 3).

Different authors use alternative terms such as ‘non-traditional students’, ‘marginalised students’, ‘under-represented students’, ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘vulnerable’ students. In the Croatian context and policy documents, two terms are widely used: ‘underrepresented’ and ‘vulnerable groups’. In this thesis, I opt to use the term ‘vulnerable’ students as this is used throughout analysed policy documents. In the context of this thesis, my area of interest is vulnerable groups, specifically, refugees and students in refugee-like situations (such as students granted subsidiary protection).

Although education has an important place on the internationalisation and integration agenda, this usually applies in providing access to basic education and higher education seems to remain outside of the global education movement (Dryden-Peterson, 2012, p. 10). Refugee students experience limited access to education at all levels, but especially on the higher education level, which is often overlooked since it is not mandatory (Zeus, 2011, p. 258; Crea & McFarland, 2015, p. 235; UNESCO, 2018, p. 150). In addition, the focus is usually on urgent needs rather than on long-term developments such as higher education (Pherali & Moghli, 2019, p. 8).

Access to higher education is not universally guaranteed, and therefore, in practice, it presents significant sources of inequality, challenges and obstacles for underrepresented and vulnerable groups, including refugees and refugee-like population, to access and participate in higher education. However, access to higher education is crucial in preparing refugees to be more integrated and active in society (Stevenson & Willot, 2007, p. 671). Moreover, refugee students should be supported in their educational intentions to overcome the negative impact of previous experiences. Despite this, according to UNHCR (2020), only 3% of refugees access higher education. Comparing to the average percentage of global youth accessing higher education, this low percentage of refugees in higher education negatively affects their prospects in the 'knowledge economy' (Pherali & Moghli, 2019, p. 2). Even though refugees' demand for accessing higher education is still marginal and it has been largely unexpected, it will likely increase in the following years (Détourbe & Goastellec 2018, p. 1; Pherali & Moghli, 2019, p. 2.; Jungblut, Vukasovic & Steinhardt, 2020, p. 1). Education enhances refugees' psychosocial, physical, and cognitive well-being and helps with understanding and coping with complicated situations in which they often find themselves (Jack, Chase & Warwick, 2019, p. 2). Social and immigration policies in different countries restrict refugee's access to some services, and education is one of them (Oliver & Hughes, 2018, p. 128). Since refugees' access to higher education relies on those policies, they are disadvantaged in the educational system in most European countries (Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018, p. 21; Griga & Hadjar, 2013, p. 275). Moreover, education access affects not only future work opportunities for refugees but also affects the sense of belonging to a society. Therefore, access to higher education is critical to the overall goals of the global education movement, especially to its commitment to equity (Dryden-Peterson, 2012, p. 10).

Education represents one of the fundamental human rights, and as such, it is protected in different international and regional treaties, declarations, and laws. Nevertheless, refugees face many challenges and barriers while trying to exercise this right and access, participate and complete higher education, and these challenges will be further explored in the following parts of this thesis. In addition, despite different barriers and challenges, the prospect of freedom incentivizes refugees to pursue higher education (Pherali & Moghli, 2019, p. 2). Looking at higher education as a human right and enhancing the integration and inclusion of refugees in society, I aim to explore how official policy documents in the Republic of Croatia construct the right to higher education for refugee students.



## **1.2 Significance of the research and contextual framework**

Every research and analysis require a context within which a chosen data set is examined (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013, p. 401). In this research, the context is limited to the higher education context of the Republic of Croatia. I chose to position this study within the Croatian context due to several factors. Firstly, the factor of accessibility influenced my decision. As Croatian is my mother tongue, more resources were available and accessible to me, making it more feasible to collect and choose data within the time frame of writing a master's thesis. Secondly, the Croatian higher education system is the one I am most closely acquainted with, being born, and raised in Croatia and obtaining my bachelor's degree there as well. During my studies, I got interested in other educational systems, which led me to spend a semester abroad and eventually do my master's degree abroad. Through this, I got the practical experience of being a student in higher education in a different context, which, I believe, contributes to the wider understanding of my own first higher education context. Lastly, the recent reforms and developments in European higher education are well-researched and thoroughly discussed. However, in Western Balkans (including Croatia), this has remained under-researched. Zgaga and co-authors (2013, p. 7) refer to those parts as 'white spots' of the European map. As a geopolitical term, Western Balkans applies to the ex-Yugoslavia countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia), Slovenia and Albania' (Zgaga et al. 2013, p. 7). The higher education context in the region of Western Balkans has remained on the margins of contemporary higher education studies since regional higher education has not been part of systematic research. According to Brajkovic (2016, p. 1), there is a lack of prior research and a lack of data. This makes the Croatian higher education context a particularly interesting context to conduct research.

## **1.3 Position of the researcher**

In qualitative research, the researcher has an important role throughout the research process. My decisions and past experiences influence the way I construct the understanding of this research, its questions, data, analysis, and findings. Therefore, it is crucial to be reflective and aware of the position of a researcher (Tracy, 2010, p. 851) In this paragraph I will focus on my underlying assumptions, experience and values guiding this research process.

Self-reflexivity represents one of the most important practices of qualitative research and it supports the researchers to acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). Tracy (2010, p. 842) offers few self-reflexive questions to guide the reflexivity process such as

*“Why am I doing this?” “Why now?” and “Am I ready for this?”* These questions help me to position myself as a researcher.

I will start by focusing on the ‘why’ of this research - why am I doing this? why now?

My academic interest in refugees’ experiences in education and creating equal possibilities in education started from my encounters with refugee children in 2016 while I was working on a project that aimed to strengthen the relationship between parents and children as a prerequisite for better inclusion in the educational sphere of children’s life. Since then, I volunteered and worked with asylum seekers and refugees in various context and various age groups which helped me to develop an understanding of challenges and barriers refugees face in daily life, not only in the educational system. Fast-forwarding to 2018, during my first year as an international student in Education and Globalisation programme, I began to feel frustrated with how different international students are perceived which extends to the perceptions toward migrants in general. Why am I considered a ‘desirable’ international student while involuntary mobile students, such as refugees are generally perceived as ‘less desirable’? This frustration and reflection lead to the decision to write an essay about involuntary student mobility and during that time my engagement with the literature in this field began. Thus, I engaged with the literature on the topic much earlier than I started conducting this thesis, which surely impacted my decisions regarding its structure, analysis, and findings. I am aware that I cannot fully understand the experience of refugees in higher education and the challenges and barriers they encounter. Nevertheless, in this thesis, I aim to understand how the right to education for refugees is constructed in policy documents, and not specifically focus on their personal experience and aspirations in higher education.

Moreover, as I was born and raised in Croatia, I took part in all educational levels until master’s degree there. Through my personal history, I gained understanding of the educational system, its organisation, as well as challenges, advantages, and disadvantages. This familiarity with the research context was helpful as it allowed me to go deeper into my own understanding. Nevertheless, it also influenced the way I read and analysed policy documents, legal framework and it created different assumptions I had even before conducting this research. I am aware I cannot distance myself completely from these assumptions to reach objectivity of the research. Nevertheless, I attempt to confront the existing assumptions and consider how it influences my analysis, answering the research question, and overall process of writing this thesis. Being aware of my assumptions and reflections enabled me to look at the data from different perspectives and try to engage with different ways of looking at the data and answering the

posed research question. While doing the analysis I would ask myself if my previous assumptions were influencing the way I organise the codes, themes and discussion and this reflexivity allowed me to better understand my own biases. Hence, I tried to include various perspectives of different researchers in all parts of the thesis and in this way, I tried to count for biases, make stronger interpretation of the data and make the research reliable.

Am I ready for this? Taking into account the answer to previous questions, at the start of this research process I would say that I am ready for conducting this research. I engaged with the literature much earlier than I started writing this thesis and I searched for various sources to help account for my assumptions and biases. Nevertheless, I will come back to answer this question in Chapter 5.

#### **1.4 Aim and the research question**

This study aimed to determine how official higher education policies of Republic of Croatia address the markers contained in the 4A Framework developed by Katarina Tomaševski. While preparing this research, I reflected on the best way to analyse educational integration and which theories and methods could be used to analyse access to education for vulnerable groups, specifically refugees, in higher education. I decided to apply a human rights-based approach since, in this thesis, I start with the concept that education is a human right and that everyone, including refugees, should be granted access to education, as well as higher education.

Throughout this thesis, the following research question is used as a guide to reach the explained aim: *How do official policy documents in Croatian higher education construct the right to higher education for refugees, according to the 4A framework developed by Tomaševski?*

Chapter 4 will specifically focus on answering the posed research question based on the data analysis. However, this whole thesis is constructed in a way that helps me to answer the posed research question. With this thesis, I aim to fill the gap in the literature and research of higher education in Croatia, at least partly, by providing a 4A analysis of selected higher education policy documents.

#### **1.5 Thesis structure**

Throughout the following chapters, I aim to explore how inclusive the Croatian higher education system is, based on the human rights-based approach. The thesis consists of six main chapters, starting with the Introduction as Chapter 1.

Chapter 2, the conceptual framework, focuses on one of the global challenges – migration. It explains the key terms needed for better understanding of the research process and sets this research into the context of higher education, following the so-called 2015 refugee crisis and its effect on Croatia, as a part of Western Balkans route. This chapter also explains the human rights-based approach which is further used to analyse official higher education policy documents. Chapter 3 explains the methodology and approach of this research and data analysis. This research is a qualitative thematic analysis of two policy documents – Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (2014) and National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia 2019 – 2021 (2018). These two documents represent the main data of this research. However, to better inform the research, other legislative documents and higher education policies have been studied, and they will be mentioned in the following chapters. Reflexive thematic analysis of main data is done using the 4A Framework by Katarina Tomaševski, with additional marker of affordability, which is also explained in further details in the chapters below. Chapter 4 follows the data analysis and focuses on findings, answering the posed research question and interpreting and discussing the findings and shortcomings in the implementation of the right of refugees to higher education in the Republic of Croatia. Chapter 5 describes additional considerations regarding the process of writing this thesis, its evaluation, limitations and recommendation for further research. Lastly, Chapter 6 address the concluding remarks.

## 2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter presents the conceptual framework of this thesis. Firstly, I briefly present one of the global challenges – migration. To set a solid base for understanding the key terms, I will define the term refugees and explain the difference between refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, and then focus on the most recent large wave of migrations to the European Union countries, the so-called 2015 refugee crisis. The refugee crisis will be looked at specifically from the Western Balkans route, as Croatia, the context of this thesis, is located on the route. In this chapter, I will also explain the legal framework, conventions, and protocols (international and the ones related to Croatian context) that aim to protect refugees' rights, including the right to education. To further explore the right to education, I will present the human rights-based approach to education developed by Katarina Tomaševski, which will be used to analyse policy documents and the Croatian higher education context. Moreover, in this chapter, I will start explaining the view of higher education as a pathway to integration, which is an idea that stretches throughout this whole thesis. Croatia is a part of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which puts the social dimension of higher education as one of its priorities, thus, it is also important to include EHEA in this thesis. Before analysing policy documents regarding the right to higher education for vulnerable groups, specifically refugees, I will explore which challenges and barriers are identified for refugees when accessing higher education. By offering a broader picture of challenges and barriers, data analysis will be done by taking those challenges into account.

### 2.1 Migration as a global challenge

Migration and mobility represent one of the mega-trends shaping global education (OECD, 2019, p. 24). The term ‘migration’ originates from the Latin word *migrare*, which means to move from place to place. ‘Migration’ assumes the movement of individuals to inhabit or settle somewhere else (Kuntin, Rajic, 2018, p. 65). Migrations that are politically affected are often associated with war situations, wartime actions and colonisation. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2020), by the end of 2020, more than 80 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide because of conflict, persecution, or violation of human rights. Looking at the number of refugees in Europe, according to the European Commission (2021) and Eurostat (2021), 2.4 million refugees and people in refugee-like situations were hosted in the EU-27 Member States at the end of 2018. In 2020, 416 600 first-time asylum seekers applied for international protection in the EU Member States.

When talking about asylum seekers and refugees, it is important to distinguish the difference between those groups.

### **Definition of the terms: refugees and asylum seekers**

According to the UNHCR (2010, p. 5), a refugee is “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.”

An asylum seeker is a person applying for asylum, which is the right to be recognised as a refugee and receive legal protection and material assistance. An asylum seeker must demonstrate that his or her fear of persecution in his or her home country is well-founded.

Refugees share various characteristics with other migrant populations, but to be recognised as a refugee, one must ask for specific care during their entire stay in the host country: “All refugees are migrants, but not all migrants are refugees” (Essomba, 2017, p. 206). In addition, refugees are different from other migrants because they are forcibly displaced (Sheikh & Anderson, 2018, p. 22). It is also important to mention that refugees come from different backgrounds with diverse religious, cultural, and ideological convictions and, therefore, are not a homogeneous group. Their age, gender, faith, ethnicity, culture, and education system in their country are among the variables which impact on shape their ability to access and succeed in higher education (Reakes, 2007, p. 92; Morrice, 2013, p. 653).

In the Republic of Croatia, concepts of asylum seekers and refugees are defined by the Law on International and Temporary Protection (2015, p. 3). An asylum seeker is a citizen of a third country, or stateless person that applies for international protection and the final decision about the international protection has not been reached. Refugees are defined by the 1951 Refugee Convention, which is the same definition used by UNHCR stated above.

The third term used is a foreigner under subsidiary protection, which defines a third-country national or a stateless person who has been granted subsidiary protection, which is different from being granted asylum. Subsidiary protection is granted to an applicant who does not meet the conditions for granting asylum, but justified reasons are indicating that returning to the country of origin is under real risk of serious injustice and is unable or unwilling to accept the protection of that country (Law on International and Temporary Protection, 2015, p. 3).

Throughout the thesis, I will use the term refugees, and under this term, I refer to individuals who are either granted asylum or subsidiary protection.

## **2.2 Refugee crisis 2015 and Balkan route – Croatia on the Balkan route**

The “European refugee crisis” is a term with which the media, politics, and the general public labelled the arrival of a large number of refugees into the European Union in 2015 and 2016. This large migratory wave showed the weakness of the European states when it comes to dealing with migration (Rogelj 2017, p. 191; Baar, 2018, p. 4). In addition, according to Tecilazic Gorsic (2017 p. 440), European policies regarding refugees were created in the 1950s and are not suitable for responding to contemporary challenges. In 2015, more than a million asylum applications were submitted in the European Union (Rogelj, 2017 p. 191). Moreover, according to Simic (2017, p. 74) and Unangst (2019, p. 145), it represented the most significant migration wave since World War II and has posed many challenges within the EU and the educational systems and institutions. The refugee crisis and the inefficiency of governments to respond to it increased the risk of social exclusion of hundreds of thousands of refugees seeking protection in the European Union (Tecilazic Gorsic, 2017 p. 439).

The former Yugoslavian countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia) have traditionally been considered emigration countries, especially from 1975 onwards and during the conflicts in the early 1990s. The war resulted in many citizens fleeing their homes and migrating to Northern European countries. According to Župaric-Iljic (2016, p. 3), emigration is primarily caused by a combination of political and economic factors. The so-called refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016 represented a major challenge for countries dealing with internal displacements since the 1990s and affected by such a large population flow for the first time after the war (Milan, 2019 p. 44). The Western Balkans route represents one of the primary transit paths leading to the EU since they have an important geographical position at the borders of the EU. In transit from passing through Turkey and Greece, migrants and refugees travelled along the Western Balkans route in an attempt to reach Central and Northern Europe (Šelo Šabic & Boric, 2016, p. 1; Milan, 2019 p. 44; El-Shaarawi & Razsa, 2019, p. 91). According to the European Commission (Frontex, n.d.), over 760 000 people travelled across the Western Balkans route in 2015. According to Milan (2019, p. 45), this high number of arrivals represented a challenge for state institutions that were not prepared to provide state protection nor suitable reception structures. Moreover, the refugee

crisis showed the lack of cooperation among policy makers in the region and negatively impacted the relations among them.

### **2.3 Croatia as a part of the Balkan route**

Since Croatia entered the European Union in 2013, emigration trend increased, both of Croatia citizens and the foreigners. According to the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2020), from the entry of Croatia into the European Union until the latest statistics available, by 2019, about 189 thousand people left the country. Baričević and Koska (2017, p. 11) state that Croatian migration policies since the 1990s have been focused on a restrictive approach, with an emphasis on returning policies for Croatian citizens abroad. Baričević and Koska (2017, p. 12) state that the approach of political elites to the issue of the legal and institutional framework of migration, asylum, and integration policies since the establishment of the state has been mainly marked by efforts to meet EU membership criteria, but also to keep immigration rates low. The same authors also state that the discourse of securitization dominated in public debates on this issue, leading to asylum seekers and refugees being perceived primarily as an economic threat to the social system and labour market and then a threat to national security. Since joining the European Union, the number of irregular migrants, including asylum seekers, has increased significantly. That has brought new challenges and problems in researching and analysing migration flows and trends and attitudes and perceptions of migrants and international protection seekers. (Župarić-Iljić, 2016 p. 12).

Until 2015, the Western Balkans route was not visible to the general public in countries on the route, for example, in Croatia. This changed when the illegalised route (Hamersak & Pleše 2020, p. 3) became a visible, state-organised transit across the Balkans to Central and Northern Europe. In September 2015, when Hungary closed its borders to refugees, the movement of refugees from Serbia was reoriented towards Croatia.

Given its geostrategic position, Croatia is an important transit territory on the Western Balkan route because it connects Southeast Europe with its central and western parts, making it one of the stopovers of many refugees and migrants whose desire to reach one of Western Europe (Tadić, Dragović & Tadić, 2016, p. 15). Croatia, as one of the less prosperous countries in the EU, was only a transit country, as the majority of migrants leave the country before processing the application for asylum (Šelo Šabić & Boric, 2016 p. 11). During the initial period, the migration of refugees passing through Croatia towards Central and Northern Europe was partially organized by state services and was partially independent. Nevertheless, in November



2015, the Winter Reception and Transit Center (as the Slavonski Brod refugee camp) was opened by the Croatian government (Hameršak & Pleše 2020 p. 3).

Baričević and Koska (2017, p. 13) state that with the beginning of the refugee crisis in the spring and summer of 2015, public interest in topics related to asylum and international protection increased, and issues related to refugee protection emerged in public discourse. These issues were previously discussed exclusively in parliamentary debates related to changes in the law on asylum / international protection and foreigners, all in the context of further adjustment to the legislation of the European Union (Baričević & Koska, 2017, p. 13). With the arrival of refugees on the territory of the Republic of Croatia during September 2015, the attention of the media and political actors in Croatia has especially increased. According to Šelo Šabic and Boric (2016, p. 11), Croatian media responded positively to the refugee crisis, and they reported personal stories of refugees and their experiences along the route to Europe, with sentiments drawing back to the experiences of many Croatians during the wars in the 1990s. However, with time, the overall positive tone has diminished.

From mid-September to mid-December 2015, half a million refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, along with forced migrants from other countries, passed through Croatia on their way to their most desirable destination, Germany (Gregurovic et al., 2016, p. 92). With the refugee crisis, Croatia has become more committed to refugee protection issues. It has also undertaken to participate in the European Union's relocation and resettlement program for third-country nationals or stateless persons who qualify for international protection. Ajdukovic and co-authors (2019, p. 17) state that by the end of 2018, 150 people had resettled through both programs, which enabled Croatia to meet the agreed quota for 2017 and 2018.

According to the Ministry of Interior (2021), there are 958 refugees in Croatia. From these total numbers, 387 individuals belong to the age category from 18-34 which is the age range that matches the age range of higher education students. This number represents 40% of the total number which shows that this age group is the largest age group of refugees in the Republic of Croatia.

## **2.4 Legal framework for refugee protection**

International protection of refugees is built on two foundations. Firstly, it is based on the special protection contained mainly in international legal documents focused specifically on the protection of refugees. Among these documents, most relevant are: 1951 Refugee Convention, 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (added to the Convention), 1969 Convention

on Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, 1957 Agreement relating to Refugee Seamen, 1973 Protocol to the aforementioned Agreement, different documents such as European Agreement on Transfer of Responsibility for Refugees from 1980.

The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol are the key legal documents (UNHCR, n.d.). With 149 State parties to either or both, they define the term 'refugee' and outlines the rights of refugees, as well as the legal obligations of States to protect them. Among documents that regulate international protection of refugees, we can also include Acts adopted by the UNHCR and other international bodies.

Furthermore, international refugee protection lies on the wider, more general level related to the protection of the human rights of all individuals. The most relevant documents to mention are: 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, 1984 Conventions against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, and 1950 the European Convention on Human Rights and the fundamental freedoms with the protocols adopted with it. In addition, there are other conventions through which some international organizations regulate some areas of human rights protections, such as the UNESCO Conventions and Conventions adopted under the International Labour Organization.

Looking into the national context of Croatia, apart from the international legislative documents, the national legislative framework for asylum includes The Law on the General Administrative Procedure, the Law on Administrative Disputes, the Law on Foreigners, the Law on Mandatory Health Insurance and Healthcare for Foreigners in the Republic of Croatia, and the Law on Free Legal Aid. By adopting the Asylum Act (2007) and the Act on Amendments and Amendments to the Asylum Act (2013), the Republic of Croatia harmonized Croatian asylum legislation with other EU asylum legislations. This has made significant progress in terms of improving the applicant protection system of asylum seekers and refugees.

Moreover, the increase in the number of individuals who were granted asylum in Croatia in the standard procedure for applying for international protection, as well as the arrival of new refugees through resettlement programs, contributed to the adoption of the Action Plan for Integration of Persons who have been granted International Protection for 2017-2019. The Action Plan's goal is to provide refugees with assistance and protection to overcome the refugee-humanitarian crisis. Some of the mentioned documents will be used in the following

paragraphs and chapters to further describe the right to education and will be consulted in the discussion part of this thesis, as they provide a valuable source of information for reaching answers to posed research questions and the conclusion. In 2005, one year after the establishment of the legislative framework for asylum, the Centre for Peace Studies (CPS) organised the first international conference on integration policies. This shows that the attention was brought to the integration of refugees and the importance of establishing integration framework years before the so-called refugee crisis when Croatia experienced a large number of people coming to its territory (CPS, 2012, p. 5).

#### 2.4.1 The right to education

Education and access to education are perceived as one of the central themes of globalization since education connects societies' cultural, political and economic spheres (Streitwieser Brueck, Moody & Taylor, 2017, p. 245). The right to education is a fundamental human right for everyone, including refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced persons. It is mentioned in different international and regional treaties, declarations, and laws as a basic human right. However, in contrast with the rights usually called 'civil and political rights' or 'the first generation of human rights' such as the right to freedom of speech and opinion or the right of freedom of belief and religion, the right to education is categorized as a 'social, economic, and cultural right' or 'second generation human rights'. The first-generation human rights are meant to protect the individual from State interference; however, second-generation human rights are, in general, not "owned" by a citizen, but they create positive duties from the government to respect and fulfil them (Willems & Vernimmen, 2018, p. 221). Although both mentioned categories should theoretically be interdependent and unified, the application of second-generation human rights has traditionally been monitored and enforced less strictly. According to Willems and Vernimmen (2018, p. 221), States tend to defend the principle that their obligation is to respect and fulfil these second-generation human rights of individuals who have a "legal relationship with the State". This may threaten the justiciability of refugees' right to education as they belong to a group that is at a high risk of being excluded from full legal protection by the State. In addition, international treaties lay on the fact that gradual positive action is needed from the State, and therefore are less specific about exact measures and obligations, which leaves it to a large extent up to the State to decide how to act and reach the result. The right to education may be subject to limitations since education needs regulation from the State. (Willems & Vernimmen, 2018, p. 221).

Refugee Convention (1951) refers to the right of education in the Article 22 (p. 24):

*“The Contracting States shall accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education. The Contracting States shall accord to refugees treatment as favourable as possible, and, in any event, not less favourable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances, with respect to education other than elementary education and, in particular, as regards access to studies, the recognition of foreign school certificates, diplomas and degrees, the remission of fees and charges and the award of scholarships”.*

The European Convention on Human Rights (1950), Article 2 (p. 34) of the First Protocol states:

*“No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.”*

Looking into the scope of the provision of education, the limitation of the right to education does not seem defensible and viable; according to Willems and Vernimmen (2018, p. 222), nationals, foreigners, stateless person and illegally residing individuals are holders of this fundamental right. Higher education, however, is not explicitly addressed by the Convention (on the contrary to primary education), and it remains in the domain of national policies and practices.

According to the Article 17 (p. 9) of the Revised European Social Charter (1996), all States should take *“all appropriate and necessary measures designed to ensure that children and young persons, taking account of the rights and duties of their parents, have the care, the assistance, the education and the training they need, in particular by providing for the establishment or maintenance of institutions and services sufficient and adequate for this purpose.”*

Although the European Social Charter applies as limited to national or persons who are lawfully resident or regularly working within the State concerned, the European Committee of Social Rights pointed out that the Charter and its fundamental rights apply to foreigners coming within the category of unlawfully present migrants (Willems & Vernimmen, 2018, p. 223).

Moreover, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (1996) recognises the right of everyone to education, stating that: *“Education must be accessible to all, especially the most vulnerable groups, in law and fact, without discrimination on any of the prohibited grounds (ICESCR General Comment no. 13, 1999, p. 3).*

The word “all” implies to everyone *“including non-nationals, such as refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons, migrant workers and victims of international trafficking, regardless of legal status and documentation” (ICESCR General Comment no. 20, 2009, p. 30).*

Article 13, 2 (p. 4) states the obligation for States to ensure that primary education is compulsory and free to all. Regarding secondary, tertiary and vocational education, States should move as effectively and efficiently as possible towards the full realization of education for all (Willems & Vernimmen (2018, p- 223). If there is no requirement for higher education to be universally accessible, it is the responsibility of the State to ensure that higher education is equally accessible on the basis of capacity. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights describes that the ‘capacity’ of individuals is ‘assessed by reference to all their relevant expertise and experience’ (ICESCR General Comment no. 13, 2009, p. 30).

The Council of Europe (Parliamentary Assembly 2006, p. 3), point 13.6, states that: *“All children have a right to education, extending to primary school and secondary school levels, in those countries where such schooling is compulsory. Education should reflect their culture and language, and they should be entitled to recognition, including through certification, of the standards achieved.”*

Higher education is not included in this definition. Nevertheless, the right to education is essential for promoting human rights. Although there are international conventions and treaties, access of refugees to the education system, to the labour market, and to society, in general, is regulated by specific national regulations with to greater or lesser extent describe the special treatment and positive discrimination of this vulnerable group (Tecilazic Gorsic, 2017 p. 441).

#### 2.4.2 The right to education in Croatia

Looking into the national context of Croatia, the fundamental human right of all citizens to education is secured by series of national documents. In addition, the legal prerequisites for ensuring equal opportunities and access to higher education exist. However, they are not

covered in a single document, but the right to study is regulated by general documents guaranteeing equality to all citizens in the society.

The legal framework of the Republic of Croatia recognises the right to education. Article 66 of the Constitution Of the Republic of Croatia (2010, p. 9) of which states, “*Everyone shall have access to education under equal conditions and in accordance with his/her aptitudes.*”

In addition, article 63 (p. 9) states that “*The state shall protect maternity, children and young people, and shall create social, cultural, educational, material and other conditions promoting the exercise of the right to a decent life.*”, therefore, showing the interconnectedness of the right to education with other rights, and with the right to a decent life.

Article 77 of the Science and Higher Education Act (2003, p. 22) states that all higher education institutions “*shall determine the procedure of the selection of the applicant in such a way as to guarantee equality of all applicants regardless of race, colour, gender, language, religion, political or another opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, social status, disability, sexual orientation and age.*”

This Act is in line with the international recommendations related to the anti-discriminatory provision of higher education, although it puts emphasis on the access to higher education, not on the participation and completion of higher education (Fernell & Kovač, 2010 p. 266). Moreover, compared to the general definition of the social dimension in the Bologna documents, which is primarily focused on the vulnerable groups of students from lower socio-economic groups, there is a broader understanding of risk factors in the definition in the forementioned Act (Puzic, et al., 2006, p. 251).

According to the Act on International Temporary Protection, Article 58 (2017, p. 26), the right to primary and secondary education for refugee children and young people is provided under the same conditions as for Croatian citizens. The same Article also defines that if a minor applicant does not know the Croatian language sufficiently, they will be allowed to attend preparatory classes or additional classes of Croatian language. However, the Article does not mention language instruction in higher education, which is in line with the fact that higher education level is often under-prioritised. According to Article 70 of the same Act (p. 31), refugees have “*the right to elementary, secondary and higher education under the same conditions as Croatian citizens, pursuant to separate regulations.*”

Refugees have the right to recognition of foreign qualifications under the same conditions as Croatian citizens. In case individuals are not able to provide the necessary documentation to prove their foreign qualifications under justified reasons, assessment of prior learning will be conducted “*by a competent body, pursuant to the regulations governing regulated professions and recognition of foreign vocational qualifications*” (Article 70, p. 31).

Furthermore, if an individual does not have sufficient financial resources available, the translation of foreign documents for the purpose of recognition of foreign qualifications shall be provided from the State Budget of the Republic of Croatia (Article 70, p. 31).

## **2.5 Human rights-based approach to education: 4A framework by Katarina Tomaševski**

*“Discussing human rights in education is not a luxury, but a necessity”*

(Tomaševski, 2001c p. 8).

According to Schaeffer (2009 p. 88), applying a human rights-based approach is fundamental in the realisation of inclusive education. Education can be viewed as a mean to eliminate and narrow existing inequalities. (Tomaševski, 2001c p. 26). However, if inequalities and discrimination are not exposed and address, they cannot be tackled. The human rights-based approach focuses on the causes of discrimination, inequality, and exclusion of vulnerable and underrepresented groups (Schaeffer, 2009 p. 88). I consider Tomaševski’s 4A Framework as a useful way to clarify the right to education. The 4A framework was developed by Katarina Tomaševski, who was a human rights activist and a professor of law on different Universities and the first United Nations Commission on Human Rights’ special rapporteur on the right to education from 1998 to 2004 (Klees & Thapliyal, 2007, p. 497).

In this thesis, 4A Framework is a tool for a better understanding of the realization of the right of vulnerable groups, specifically refugees, to higher education in Croatian education policy, and it will be applied to analyse two key policy documents – Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (2014) and National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia 2019 – 2021 (2018). Tomaševski’s approach is applicable to the topic of this thesis because it offers improvement in the way the right to education is understood.

The 4A framework is based on the assumption that governments have an obligation to make education available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable. It suggests that inclusive educational systems must be based on those four key dimensions. Tomaševski's approach is mostly related to child learners and their learning environments in compulsory education (Barros & Biasin, 2019 p. 480). Nevertheless, when applied in the higher education context, it provides a great framework for analysing educational policies in terms of the right to education as a fundamental right (Hajrullaia & Saliua, 2016, p. 70). In addition, issues related to availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability go beyond compulsory educational level (Schaeffer, 2009 p 87). According to Schaeffer (2009, p. 89), applying a rights-based approach to achieve an inclusive educational system emphasises those who are currently marginalized, underrepresented, and/or excluded from the educational system. The rights-based approach also offers space for identifying causes of exclusion and helps diminishing power relations based on poverty and social injustice. Identifying and eliminating structural challenges and barriers in access to education, with the specific focus on the financial ones, is the key to progress in ensuring access to education for everyone.

There is no clarity in defining what the right to education is (Tomaševski, 2001a, p. 5). However, according to Tomaševski (2001b, p. 17), it can be defined as access to education at all levels – from early childhood education and care to post-graduate studies. The importance of the right to education goes beyond education itself. Education, as Tomaševski (2001b, p. 10) states, “operates as a multiplier, enhancing the enjoyment of all individual rights and freedoms”. Consequently, when the right to education is denied or violated, individuals cannot enjoy many of their rights and freedom. Education enhances the enjoyment of many rights and fundamental freedoms. The right to education is interconnected with many other rights, such as rights linked with employment and social security (Tomaševski, 2001a, p. 9). Access to education directly impacts access to the labour market and career achievements. In addition, denial of the right to education results in exclusion from the labour market and exclusion from social security schemes. Because of the interconnectedness of rights, a large number of issues linked with the denial of human rights cannot be solved unless the right to education is addressed as a primary point (Tomševski, 2001a, p. 9).

There could be no right to education without obligations from the governments (Tomaševski 2001b, p. 13). According to Tomaševski (2001b, p. 8), governments are obliged to secure human rights for their citizens. Governmental work could also be assisted by international human rights law. However, international human rights law cannot be applied directly in the



majority of countries, and rather, international human rights are converted to domestic law and then applied (Tomaševski, 2001b, p. 11). International human rights law defines governmental obligations to relate to human rights as a whole (Tomaševski, 2001b, p. 16). The important role of the government is to set educational strategy (and monitor its implementation), set and enforce educational standards, and put in place corrective actions. According to Tomaševski (2001b, p. 16), the core governmental obligations in education are to ensure that education is available and that freedom is respected in education. The 4A framework provides clarity for addressing the right to education (particularly for vulnerable students) as it outlines obligations governments have in the realisation of the right to education (Tomaševski 2001b, p. 16; Schaeffer 2008 p. 87, Ramaahlo, Tönsing, & Bornman., 2018 p. 4).

During her work as a Special Rapporteur, Tomaševski stated that there is not much that can be done within United Nations to protect the right to education, as it is one out of many issues it deals with (2001b, p. 6). Because of that, it is necessary to provide external academic and professional input in evolving policies to redress the previous neglect of the right to education. The right to education must be recognised and protected at all levels, from global to local and vice versa, “and it fully reflects the interplay between the dual processes of globalization and localization which are now taking place” (Tomaševski, 2001b, p. 9). Within the 4A framework, appropriate policy documents, legislation, and effective implementation are key factors for making inclusive education a reality. (Ramaahlo, et al., 2018 p. 3). As stated in Barros and Biasin (2019, p. 481), before and after Tomaševski’s work in the UN, those four concepts were considered essential in monitoring ways of realization (or deprivation) of human rights in several domains, not only education. Moreover, 4A Framework has based on the premise that the right to education represents a fundamental human right, and it is a crucial mean in the realization of other human rights (Schaeffer, 2008, p. 87; Barros & Biasin, 2019, p. 480). Due to the interconnectedness and interrelation of the right to education with other human rights, it is essential to all other rights. Because of that, achieving the right to education for all, according to Schaeffer (2008, p. 87), is one of the biggest challenges in the globalised world.

By analysing a particular country through the four dimensions, a description of the educational system can be obtained, or it can be used to understand how the right to education is addressed and respected in a chosen country. The methodology chapter will further explain the 4A markers and how they are used in this thesis.

## 2.6 Higher education as a pathway to integration

### 2.6.1 The concept of integration

The concept of 'integration' originally represented a theoretical concept. However, with time the concept became a political concept as well. Thus, there is no one way of understanding the concept of integration. According to Kärkkäinen (2017, p. 31) and Ager and Strang (2008, p. 166), the concept of integration is very broad and vague, and it "means whatever people want it to mean" (Kärkkäinen, 2017, p. 31). Integration policy implies the determination of goals and principles and a series of measures, activities, and stakeholders that will include refugees in a particular society. The term 'integration policy' refers to the "public national policy which determines the goals, principles, participants and activities to promote the integration of foreigners and refugees" (Asylum in Croatia, 2006, p. 6). Integration is a two-way process, which means it needs two sides included in order to be successful (adjustments occur in both asylum seekers or refugees and the recipient society). It is a long-term, multidimensional, and dynamic process (European Commission, 2003; 2016). However, according to Kärkkäinen (2017, p. 30), at the policy level, migrants, including refugees, are presented as the ones who are expected to accept the values of the receiving society and need to adapt. This may unintentionally refer to migrants and refugees like the ones whose values are different and not in correspondence with the values of receiving society (Kärkkäinen, 2017, p. 30). According to the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (2005, p. 14), from a refugee perspective, integration requires a willingness to adapt to the lifestyle of a new society without loss of their cultural identity. From the recipient society perspective, integration requires a willingness to accept refugees as part of the national community and taking action to facilitate their access to resources and decision-making processes.

If the recipient country does not have implemented integration framework and measures, it leads to the social exclusion of refugees, which may cause emotional and economic difficulties (Tecilazic Gorsic, 2017 p. 439). Therefore, the integration framework needs to include different dimensions of integration and targeted measures from different state administration bodies. In the Republic of Croatia, the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Affairs policy, along with social welfare centres, is responsible for ensuring accommodation for refugees, the Ministry of Science and Education, educational institutions and higher education institutions are obliged to provide a free Croatian language course and recognition of foreign qualification. Furthermore, the Ministry of Health is responsible for providing health care, and the Ministry

of Labour to create measures for the assessment of the competencies of refugees, counselling, and inclusion in the labour market (Tecilazic Gorsic 2017, p. 442).

Integration represents one of the key policy objectives when it comes to the resettlement of refugees. Despite different understandings and definitions, integration is significant, both in terms of policy goals and as a desired outcome (Ager & Strang, 2008, p. 167). In addition, integration is related and interconnected with many areas of life (Ager & Strang, 2008, p. 184). Because of this interconnectedness, according to Kärkkäinen (2017, p. 33), we can talk about cultural, social, linguistic, and structural integration. Moreover, integration takes places in different areas of life at different time, and integration in one area does not necessarily mean integration in another area. In the case of refugees, the term integration is mostly connected with finding their place in the recipient society and could be viewed as participation in societal life, working life, or education (Kärkkäinen, 2017, p. 32).

#### 2.6.2 The role of higher education in integration

Even though the research about the integration and success of refugees in higher education is still limited, the relevance of this issue and its challenges are increasingly becoming obvious (Reinhardt et al., 2018, p. 1). Education is one of the key actors in the process of integration, socialization, and formulating one's identity (Zeus, 2009, p. 258). Furthermore, education has an important role in the empowerment of refugees and their integration in all dimensions (Tecilazic Gorsic, 2017 p. 437), and it represents both strength and vulnerability for people on the move (UNESCO, 2018, p. 4). Therefore, enabling refugees to acquire basic knowledge of the language of society, history, and the work of institutions is essential for successful integration, while access to education is crucial for enabling children and adult refugees to be successful and active members of society.

With the increasing emphasis and interest in reducing social inequalities and creating inclusive societies, higher education institutions are seen as having a crucial role in achieving societal change (Altiok et al., 2021, p. 44). According to Morrice (2013, p. 652) and Jungblunt and co-authors. (2020, p. 2), access to higher education is one of the core strategies which can be used to enhance and support integration in societies and re-establish individuals' professional identity. Higher education can foster employability and, consequently, be a significant potential for economic growth. Policies that limit educational opportunities for refugees may result in a long-term negative impact on successful integration (Streitwieser 2020, p. 8).

Refugee students should be supported in their educational intentions in order to overcome the negative impact of previous experiences. However, the issue for the educational system is making the system able to meet the diverse needs of a wide range of refugee and refugee-like students (McCharty & Vickers, 2008, p. 285). Finally, migration is always a diverse and complex phenomenon. Decisions regarding its aspects are necessary even though the resources are limited, and decisions cannot be easily made. According to Gateley (2015, p. 27), policymakers often problematize refugees and make policies based on top-down procedures, which lead to passivity and dependence of refugees. Higher education institutions should evaluate and modify their procedures and policies that meet the needs of involuntary mobile students and create opportunities and chances which can be beneficial for the whole society. According to a report commissioned by UNICEF, education can be a key part of this process, “education is not a marginal player in peacebuilding, but a core component of building sustainable peace” (Rasheed & Munoz, 2016 p. 175). Therefore, higher education is important for the long-term impacts, both economic and humanitarian (Reinhardt et al., 2018, p. 3).

Since it is clear that education does not happen by itself and that access to higher education (or education in general) is not going to be realised without the collaboration of different actors and stakeholders. There is a need for different stakeholders to be aware of the interconnectedness between different elements in the system (Rasheed & Munoz, 2016, p. 176). Higher education has an integral role in human capital development and being a point of reflection on social, cultural, intellectual and economic national development (Pherali & Moghli, 2019, p. 4). According to the Report by Altıok and co-authors (2021, p. 74), the research shows that higher education positively impacts students’ personal development, which then affects other aspects of their lives. Therefore, the way for refugees to become valued members of society is, at least partially, through higher education (Jack et al., 2019, p. 13). Education has an important role in the process of integration; thus, restricting that access can have negative effects on integration (Oliver & Hughes, 2018, p. 141). While inclusion in higher education is a good integration strategy, refugees continue to be excluded (Streitwieser et al., 2020 p. 4). Limiting access to higher education has crucial implications for the future life of refugees, limit social and economic mobility as well as their access to the labour market, which may lead to unemployment or underemployment (Crea & McFarland, 2015, p. 236; Bajwa et al., 2017, p. 57).

According to Stevenson and Willot (2007, p. 671), many refugees face different issues and challenges that affect their educational paths. Some of the issues are interrupted education,

traumatic experience, displacement, and restricted access to education. However, despite those, many refugee students view higher education as a way to overcome the past, escape discrimination and low socio-economic standard (Stevenson & Willot, 2007, p. 677). According to Perry and Mallozzi (2017, p. 496), refugees show a high level of motivation to participate in higher education programs. However, this motivation does not always translate into practice. There is an existing lack of research that focuses on long-term refugee education, considering access to higher education (Zeus, 2009, p. 258).

### 2.6.3 Challenges and barriers for refugees in accessing higher education

According to Rasheed and Munoz (2016, p. 172), one of the biggest challenges regarding refugees' access to higher education is the fact that higher education is simply often ignored and pushed aside. It is not viewed as a possible solution in crisis moments. Rasheed and Munoz (2016, p. 172) also point out that the so-called refugee crisis, which was at its recent peak in 2015, represents one of the biggest tragedies of modern history. The refugee crisis surely affected the affected countries' geographical and educational context and beyond borders. According to Perry and Mallozzi (2017, p. 492), refugees' educational needs are generally poorly understood. Crea and McFarland (2015, p. 244) state that limiting access to higher education has crucial implications for the future life of refugees and their access to the labour market. One may encounter different barriers when trying to integrate into the educational system. Many refugees experience challenges and poverty, similar or worse than other vulnerable and marginalised groups (Gateley, 2015, p. 29). Many refugee students have started or even completed higher education in their home countries. However, this is often overlooked, as refugees may experience complications while identifying and proving their educational documents from their home countries. Since those are needed for higher education application, this is one of the barriers to access higher education (Bajwa et al., 2017, p. 57).

Furthermore, for many refugee and refugee-like students, one more barrier is the host country's language. In most cases, the host country's language is different from their mother tongue (Griga & Handjar, 2015, p. 276). The language barrier is particularly strong, and according to Perry and Mallozzi (2017, p. 492), refugees usually have lower English language level than other immigrants. According to Stevenson and Willot (2007, p. 680), insufficient language skills are preventing integration in all aspects of life, and they are the most crucial in preventing access to higher education. Nevertheless, according to Maringe, Ojo and Chiramba (2017, p. 222), universities do not see it as their responsibility to teach immigrant students the language

of instructions. Insufficient language skills are increasing the feelings of alienation and marginalization (Maringe, et al., 2017, p. 222). Kanno and Varghese (2010, p. 321) state that, focusing only on solving linguistic barrier, higher education institutions have a limited impact on achieving equality. Challenges and barriers are rising from sociocultural, institutional and material disadvantages, not only from language proficiency (Stevenson & Williot, 2007, p. 672; Kanno & Varghese, 2010, p. 321).

Many refugee students also lack access to educational support services. The available research on access to HE showed that young refugees express struggles in finding relevant and reliable sources of information (Gateley, 2015, p. 30, Bajwa et al., 2017, p. 59). Lack of information and knowledge about the educational system creates more difficulties and confusion when one tries to enter and stay in higher education (Stevenson & Willot, 2007, p. 671). Despite encountered difficulties when trying to access higher education, many refugee students remain highly motivated and persistent in the whole process. Education is often viewed as a hope for a better future and a desire to use higher education to overcome exclusion and poverty (Stevenson & Willott, 2007, p. 671; Crea & McFarland, 2015, p. 244; Pherali & Moghli, 2019 p. 3). According to Yizid (2019, p. 12), challenges regarding the integration of vulnerable groups and refugees in higher education are summarised in Figure 2:

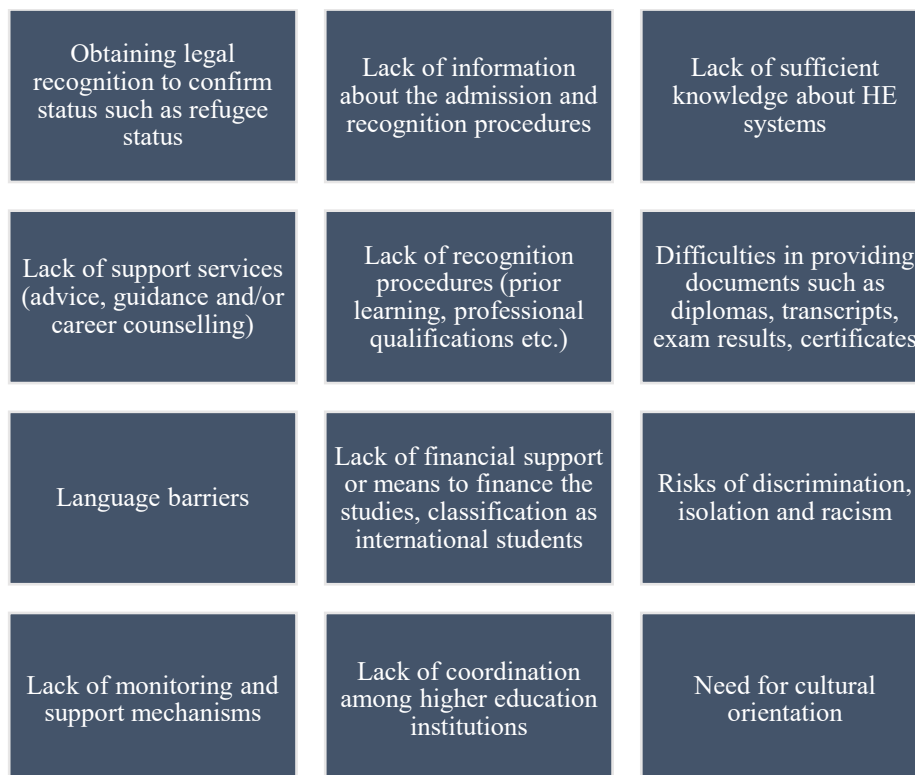


Figure 2. Challenges and barriers. Created by author, based on Yizid (2019, p. 2)

Finally, and according to Streitweiser and Unger (2018, p. 16), perhaps most difficult, refugees have to work through socioemotional trauma, uncertainty regarding the asylum process, and a reaction from some parts of the population against their presence in society.

## **2.7 Internationalisation of higher education as a feature of diversity and inclusion**

With positioning internationalisation on the higher education agenda, there is a need for discussing the connection between internationalisation and inclusion. According to Report by Altıok and co-authors (2021, p. 45), different inclusion strategies focus on the internationalisation of education. Furthermore, internationalisation represents a key strategic goal (Maringe, Ojo & Chiramba, 2017, p. 223). Economic productivity, political stability, and safety represent some of the most important factors attracting international students. Neoliberalism is encouraging universities to look for new income sources, emphasizing recruitments of full-fee paying international students (Beech, 2018, p. 611). Therefore, student mobility represents an important source of income for many countries. In the majority of OECD countries, which are the most popular student destinations, the tuition fees are higher for international students enrolled in university programs (Levent, 2016, p. 3855). In the European context, economies are seeking to recruit and keep students after finishing their degree.

Traditionally, higher education was considered as a place of teaching and research and as a primary source of new knowledge (Marcelic, 2015, p. 41). Social, economic, and political changes in Europe have had a big impact on the understanding and purposes of higher education. Moreover, social and political expectations regarding higher education also changed. Present-day universities have progressed from serving a privileged few to universal mass participation of representatives of the broader society (Marcelic, 2015, p. 44). On one side, we can see countries challenged by the phenomenon of mass higher education, while on the other side, we can see challenges related to global trends in higher education. Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was clear evidence that the educational state in Europe has been significantly changed, and the 'national' has been increasingly challenged by 'global' (Zgaga 2009, p. 181). Different processes and changes that occur during that time contributed to a new meaning of the word 'Europe'. It was no longer understood as a geographic entity, but as a whole, and as such, it is diverse, but that "diversity is our richness" (Zgaga, 2009 p. 175). Taking Europe as a whole, the idea of building a common European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and European Research Area (ERA) was soon recognised as a new paradigm (Zgaga,

2009, p. 176). Finally, the emerging ‘knowledge society’ showed that higher education is encountering great changes, both structural and conceptual (Zgaga, 2009, p. 175). A growing number of individuals with higher education implies a shift from privileged positions of the university as a primary source of knowledge towards a society in which university is only one of the actors in the ‘knowledge society’ (Marcelic, 2015, p. 41). Criticisms have often been made that higher education is more and more understood as an economical drive. Biesta (2009, p. 151) states that adult education, as well as higher education, is becoming reduced to only one of its purposes, which is ‘learning for earning’. However, higher education should be focused on a ‘full range of purposes’, as stated in London Communiqué from 2007 (p. 1). It is important to recognise the important influence that higher education institutions have on developing societies as a whole. Since higher education institutions have traditionally been centres of research, learning and knowledge transfer, they also have a key role in defining, developing and transmitting the values of society (Zgaga, 2009 p. 176). Higher education institutions need to have the necessary resources to continue the process of fulfilling a range of purposes.

Refugee and refugee-like students do not fit in the so-called neoliberal standard of students, which perceives students as the ones responsible for their own educational success on the growing market and integration into society (Stevenson & Willot, 2007, p. 672; Beech, 2018, p. 611). Since internationalisation of the educational market is positioned high on the neoliberal agenda, accepting more refugees in higher education institutions may possibly result in loss of international students who are adding on institution’s value and prestige (Streitwieser, et al., 2017, p. 245).

### 2.7.1 European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process

In Europe, the internationalisation of higher education has substantially changed the landscape of academia. The creation of a “borderless European space” (Doiz, Lasagabaster, & Sierra 2011, p. 347, as cited in Margic & Vodopija-Krstanovic, 2015 p. 43) is associated with the Bologna Process and the advancement of English. Bologna Process is voluntary multilateral cooperation between different ministries responsible for higher education from 47 European countries. This voluntary character means that it is often up to the individual ministry to decide how to implement Bologna Process in the national higher education system (Zgaga, 2015, p. 1). With the Bologna Process, European countries should make higher education more comparable and harmonised, with unified research methods which will make the monitoring



progress possible (Zgaga, 2015, p. 1). Bologna Process harmonised European Higher Education Area by establishing European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and comparable degree structures. This fostered mobility and contributed to using English as the common language in higher education. Therefore, Bologna Process represents one of the most influential mechanisms for implementing reforms of higher education (Fernell & Kovač, 2010 p. 263).

Although the Bologna Declaration from 1999 did not cover the issue of injustice in higher education or widening participation, all of the following Ministerial Communiqués since 2001 (starting with the Prague Communiqué in 2001) are placing increasing emphasis on the importance of ensuring the so-called social dimensions of the Bologna Process (Puzic, et al., 2006, p. 245). Following the Bergen Communiqué in 2005, concrete measures were taken at the European level to create the preconditions for encouraging European governments to shape quality national policies for widening access and participation in higher education. The first measure was the formation of the Working Group on Social dimension in signatory countries of Bologna Process in 2005 with the aim of better defining the concept of "social dimension" and collecting more accurate data on social and the economic position of the students, as and on student mobility in Europe. The second measure was a collection of more reliable data for monitoring social dimensions in Europe through Eurostat and Eurostudent. The third measure was the decision of adding a special annexe in the national reports on the implementation of the Bologna process in which governments must report on their national strategies for enhancing the social dimension. The social dimension rises from the conception of higher education as a public and societal good available to everyone, regardless of their background, socioeconomic status, or other factors. In addition, considering higher education as societal good creates possibilities to eliminate challenges and barrier preventing the inclusion of under-represented and vulnerable groups (Altiok, Demiryontar & Osseiran, 2021, p. 9).

A comprehensive definition of the social dimension was agreed in London in 2007 (London Communiqué, 2007, p. 5): *“Higher education should play a strong role in fostering social cohesion, reducing inequalities and raising the level of knowledge, skills and competencies in society. The policy should therefore aim to maximise the potential of individuals in terms of their personal development and their contribution to a sustainable and democratic knowledge-based society. We share the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations. We reaffirm the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles*

*related to their social and economic background. We, therefore, continue our efforts to provide adequate student services, create more flexible learning pathways into and within higher education, and to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity.”*

Yerevan Ministerial Communiqué (2015, p. 2) also highlights the importance of improving the social dimension and states that making European higher education systems more inclusive is an essential aim for the EHEA as Europe’s population is becoming increasingly diversified, due to immigration and demographic changes. The social dimension will be enhanced, including ensuring gender balance in higher education and widening access to higher education, successful completion and opportunities to participate in international mobility programs for students from vulnerable groups.

According to the latest Ministerial Communiqué from Rome (2020, p. 5), socially inclusive higher education remains at the focus of the EHEA and will require providing opportunities and support for the inclusion of individuals from all parts of society. According to the Rome Communiqué (2020, p. 4), higher education will have a crucial role in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, and higher education will be inclusive in a way that “every learner will have equitable access to higher education and will be fully supported in completing their studies and training” (p 4).

Although in the context of this thesis I mention only a few most relevant Ministerial Communiqués, it can be seen from these documents that there is an agreement from European ministries about the importance of the social dimension of higher education and widening participation for non-traditional students. Furthermore, there is an agreement about the fact that this process requires defining strategies and action plans, as well as allocating additional funds for their implementation. It has to be built on the integrated approach, which takes into account a holistic view of injustice in access to higher education. In addition, collecting data on causes of injustices in higher education is a necessary requirement for quality and targeted policies in this domain (Fernell & Kovač, 2010 p. 265). This agreement is a confirmation that the social dimension of higher education has political, social and economic importance and that policies targeted at the social dimension will eventually become a part of the mainstream public policies of higher education in EHEA, which also affects the process of reforms of higher education in Croatia (Fernell & Kovač, 2010, p. 265). The two higher education policy documents analysed in this thesis were also influenced by EHEA and the Bologna process, which will be further explained in the following chapters.

### 2.7.2 Croatian higher education context

Although Croatia is a part of EHEA nowadays, the contextualization of its higher education system-specific context and history has to be taken into account. Thus, I will start this chapter by introducing the post-socialist context of Croatian higher education.

As a post-transition country in the Western Balkans that has abolished a socialist regime and survived a war 25 years ago, Croatia is still struggling with political, cultural, and organizational influence from the past, affecting all sectors, including higher education. It should be emphasized that higher education is embedded in a certain geographical, cultural, political, social and even economic context, making it simultaneously shaped from multiple, often contradictory, positions. In addition, Croatia is the last country to become an EU member in 2013, after a decade of negotiations and harmonisation of policies and legislations. Looking into the recent past, Croatia and the other neighbouring countries had a difficult transition period after a war, leading to inefficient administrative structures, corruption, and low government accountability since the early 1990s. These mentioned weaknesses affect the higher education systems, as they are directly overseen by the governments (Brajkovic, 2016, p. 3). The major changes in Croatian higher education started in the early 1990s when the political system changed from one party to a multi-party political system (Doolan et al., 2018, p. 467).

In post-transition countries, such as Croatia, there is often “a cyclical movement of ideas and policies that represents a continuous shifting of competing schools of thought on the ideological and political leadership levels” (Brajkovic, 2016, p. 2). Those successive and often contradictory shifts are linked with the leading political programmes, economic cycles, and influence of current social and political forces in the country (for example, conservative government change the legislation done by liberal government and vice versa). The currently predominating narrative is the common one in the EU and ‘knowledge-based economy’. Therefore, the role of education is to develop and transform the Croatian economy and society into a ‘knowledge society’. The ‘knowledge society’ puts emphasis on the importance of higher education for the competitiveness of the states and individuals (Dolenec & Doolan, 2013, p. 10). According to Dolenec and Doolan (2013, p. 13), Croatian policies have been affected by neoliberal policies and influenced by Lisbon Strategy policy objectives as a set of ideas towards increasing the competitiveness of knowledge-based economies. However, the implementation of these policies has led to increasing inequality and reduced social mobility across Europe. According to Brajkovic (2016, p. 2), the neo-liberalism in Croatia is still very rhetorical as the

EU funding and private source funding is still very low, and most of the funding for higher education comes from the states. Nevertheless, according to Dolenc and Doolan (2013, p. 2), the struggle in understanding the effects of neoliberal policies affects higher education in Croatia. The transition from a social regime to the market economy, following the war in the 1990s, resulted in draining national resources and shutting down big national industries and corporations after privatization processes occurring during the political transition. According to Brajkovic (2018, p. 10), these processes constrained economic development, drained the country's wealth, and led to thousands of workers losing their jobs. Moreover, the final result of this transition is nowadays taking place as an extensive brain drain of highly skilled young people.

### 2.7.3 Overview of the Croatian higher education

Croatian higher education system is managed on a national level. Since the 2000s, the Croatian higher education system was going through significant and intensive structural reforms with the aim to adapt as much as possible to the European Higher Education Area defined by the Bologna declaration (Puzic, Doolan, & Dolenc, 2006, p. 243; Kurelic & Rodin, 2012, p. 31). Higher education is primarily organised according to the Act on Scientific Activity and Higher Education from 2003, which established a binary system of professional and academic programmes of study. In accordance with the Act, all university programmes were restructured in line with Bologna principles, introducing three cycles of higher education (Bachelor's, Master's and doctorate), diploma supplement and The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) (Doolan et al., 2018, p. 468; Eurydice, 2020) to contribute to Croatian integration into EHEA. Higher education is provided at universities (and their constituents: faculties, academies of arts, university departments), colleges and polytechnics through professional and university study programmes corresponding to different qualification levels (5, 6, 7, 8), in line with European Qualifications Framework (Eurydice, 2020). Since 2005, students in Croatia have been able to enrol only on the university programmes that have been through Bologna reform. Figure 1 shows the current higher education organisation in Croatia according to the Agency for Science and Higher Education.

## SCHEME OF HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN CROATIA

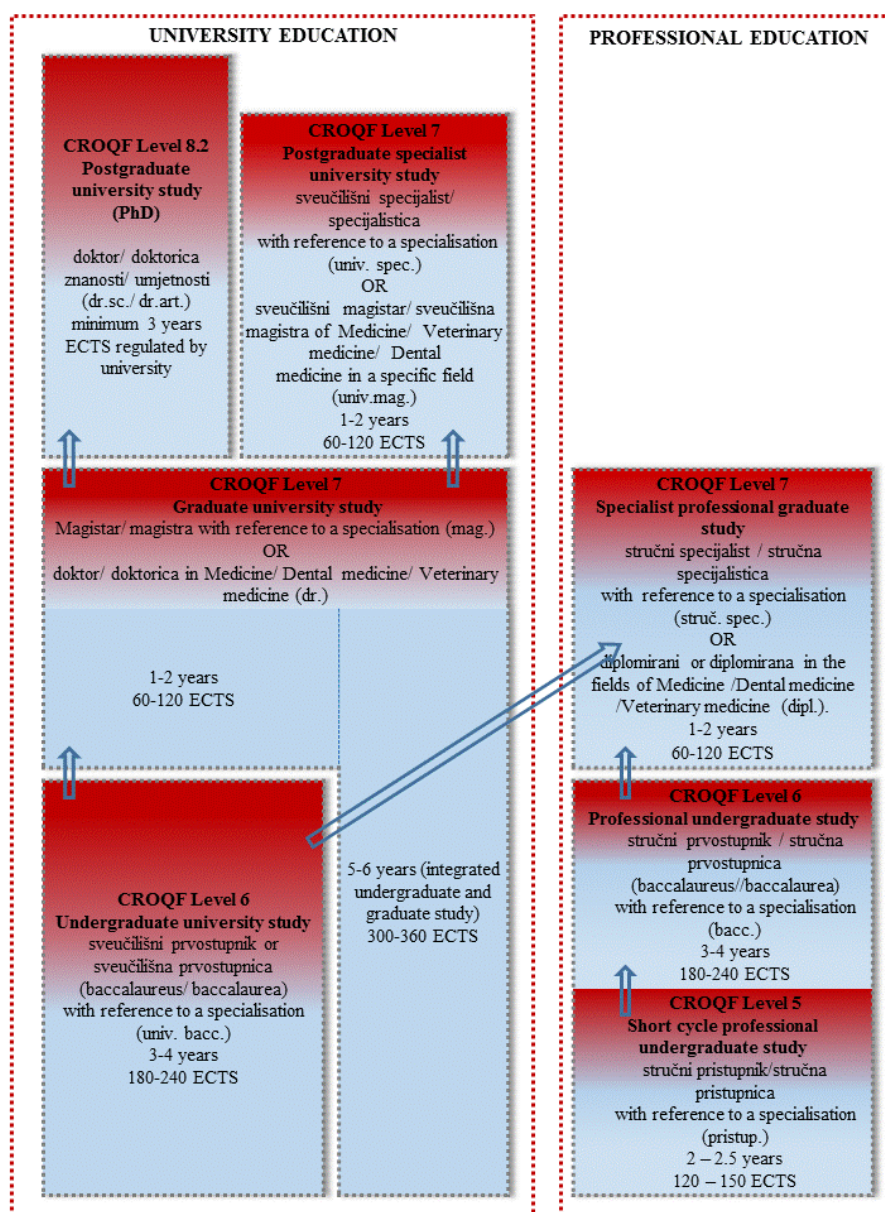


Figure 1: The structure of the Croatian higher education system (Agency for Science and Higher Education, n.d.)

University studies provide competencies preparing students for the development and implementation of scientific, professional, and artistic achievements in their career in science, art, business, higher education, and society in general. University studies are organised in three cycles: undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate. There are few exceptions where study programmes are organised as an integrated undergraduate and graduate studies, such as Medicine, Law or Primary Teacher Education. Professional studies, on the other hand, develop students' skills for their inclusion in the labour market. Professional studies are organised at

colleges, polytechnics, and universities. Usually, they include a professional undergraduate programme (short cycle) and undergraduate and specialist graduate professional studies (Eurydice, 2020). Croatian higher education is organised as full-time and part-time studies. Full-time students are the ones who study according to a program based on a full teaching schedule, and the costs of full-time studies are fully or partially subsidised from the state budget, according to the decision of the Government of the Republic of Croatia. Part-time students attend a higher education programme in addition to work or another activity, and the student fully covers the costs of part-time studies. (Government of the Republic of Croatia, n.d.). According to the Strategy of Education, Science and Technology (2014, p. 162), studying part-time requires alternative provision types and different schedules. Nevertheless, learning outcomes and competencies are supposed to be the same as those of full-time studies.

The 2003 Act on Scientific Activity and Higher Education introduced the regulation of private higher education institutions, which lead to the establishment of private universities, polytechnics, and colleges. Private higher education institutions enrol about 10% of all students (ASHE, 2019). According to the Register of Study Programmes of the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education, there is currently 1,693 accredited study programmes in Croatia (HKO, 2020). There are currently nine public and three private universities, 12 public and three private polytechnics, three public and 26 private colleges. The University of Zagreb is a flagship university, and it enrolls around 50% of the overall student population (MOZVAG, 2020). Universities' study programmes are predominantly in the social sciences and the humanities, followed by technical sciences, the arts, biomedicine and health, and natural sciences. Therefore, there is a prevalence of programmes in the social sciences and the humanities (only at universities) and the prevalence of university study programmes compared to programmes of polytechnics and colleges. In addition, the 2003 Act on Scientific Activity and Higher Education assigned admission quotas, tuition fees and different payment schemes. According to the mentioned Act, sources of funding higher education institutions are state budget via the Ministry of Science and Education, local authorities' funds, founders' funds, institutions' own funds, project-based funds, and donors (Brajkovic, 2016, p. 7)

Until the academic year 2010/2011, there was a dual categorization of students according to their tuition-paying status. Students were either enrolled within the quota subsidized by the state and therefore would not pay the tuition, or they were enrolled above the subsidized quota and pay the tuition fee. This would depend on merit-based criteria (as students grades in previous levels of education) or entrance exams. According to Brajkovic (2016, p. 8), an increase in

students over the years would primarily mean an increase in tuition-paying students. Based on this, the OECD study (2008) referred to the problematic essence of this multi-tier tuition system, acknowledging that it is very complex, appears not to be equitable and does not encourage efficiency. During the 2010 state-wide student protests occurred to demand free higher education for all students. As a consequence, this led to the government decision regarding the change in tuition fees (Brajkovic, 2016 p. 8). Therefore, starting with the academic year 2010/2011, all full-time undergraduate and graduate students who enter higher education institutions do not pay tuition fees during their first year of studies. After the first year, tuition fees would be charged according to the merit-based criteria based on collected ECTS credits. In practice, this would mean that if the student did not reach a minimum of 55 ECT credits (out of 60) during the given academic year, they would have to pay tuition for the missing credits. The government saw this as a way for more students to be able to study without paying tuition fees.

Regarding the language of instruction, despite the increasing internationalisation of higher education, there has been little attention directed to organising course instruction in other languages, including English-medium instruction, in Croatia (Margic & Vodopija-Krstanovic, 2015 p. 43). Higher education is, therefore, almost exclusively conducted in the Croatian language. Since English is an international language, offering courses and degrees in English is necessary for promoting cultural diversity, intercultural understanding, and mobility (Margic & Vodopija-Krstanovic, 2015 p. 44).

The aim of the Bologna reform, according to the Croatian Agency for Science and Higher Education (2013), was to implement the principles of the Bologna Declaration and position Croatian higher education in the European Higher Education Area, leading to enable international students to access to Croatian Universities (ASHE, 2013). According to Margic and Vodopija-Krstanovic (2015 p. 47), Bologna reform in Croatia was in line with the trend in Eastern and Central Europe where the application of the Bologna process was a way to move towards standardisation and “upgrading” university standards to Western Europe. Moreover, the Bologna reform also led to the reform of governance in higher education, changing it from the state-governance model to the state-supervision model (Lučin & Prijic Samaržija, 2012, p. 36). Although it was claimed that Bologna would increase the quality of higher education in Croatia, it has not resulted in the desired effects. According to Margic and Vodopija-Krstanovic (2015 p. 47), the initial enthusiasm linked with the Bologna process soon lessened. The reason was that the Bologna process was rushed, without adequate preparation. The implementation

was not successful due to a misunderstanding of the whole process, its objectives and goals, as well as the lack of pressure from the international level (Kurelic & Rodin, 2012, p. 29). Therefore, grass-roots changes were not introduced, but only revisions were made to the curricula (Margic & Vodopija-Krstanovic, 2015, p. 48). According to Kurelic and Rodin (2012, p. 29), policymakers in Croatian higher education were trying to resist Bologna process and to retain old academic and political arrangements. Therefore, the higher education system is based on elements of the previous academic system with some elements of the Bologna Process. Such a model is not adapted either to the EHEA or Croatian society.

However, despite criticism, Croatia, as a member of the EHEA, and a part of the Bologna Process, is committed to implementing and realizing the goals and outcomes in line with the Bologna reform of higher education. In addition, Farnell (2012, p. 26) states that Croatia, like other European countries, shapes its strategic documents in relation to the recommendations of international institutions, such as EU institutions, the Bologna Process, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the European University Association (EUA) and the European Student Union (ESU). As mentioned before, EHEA recognised the need to include a separate, social dimension of higher education as one of the priorities of the Bologna process. Some of the important measures included in international documents are widening interest in higher education, ensuring the flexibility of enrolment policies, providing financial support, adapting study programs, and providing support services (Farnell, 2012, p. 28). Farnell (2012, p. 29) emphasizes that within the Bologna Process, the social dimension is prioritised in the list of measures until 2020, with the necessary positive consequences for higher education in Croatia. According to Farnell (2012, p. 30), the Croatian government and higher education institutions need to follow international trends, and they are expected to be committed to setting up equal opportunities and widening participation as one of the higher priorities in higher education nowadays. Moreover, educational failure and the resulting social exclusion are "expensive for the state" in the long run (Farnell, 2012, p. 30).

In the Croatian context, the impression is that the competitiveness aspect of the Bologna process is given much more attention than the social dimension. Moreover, the emphasis was on structural reforms while the social dimension was in the shadow (Puzic et al., 2006 p. 244; p 256). Despite numerous national strategies and measures related to the widening of participation in higher education and social dimension, this topic has a relatively minor position in higher education reforms until 2009. Nevertheless, since 2006 many researchers and experts



became actively involved in the specific issues of justice and human rights in higher education and organised many meetings and hearings on that topic, which resulted in publications of recommendations for policy and decision-makers (Fernell & Kovač, 2010 p. 269). This resulted in putting the social dimension of higher education and widening participation higher on the policy agenda. In the National Report of the Bologna Process in 2009, the social dimension in Croatian higher education was elaborated for the first time. According to the analysis made by Fernell and Kovač in 2010, the principle of social dimension and widening participation in higher education is present in the education policies of Croatia. However, these measures are specifically related to the inclusion of students with disabilities and Roma students. Although the implementation of those measures was not always sufficient for meeting the needs of the target group and better monitoring of the implementation was needed, the measures resulted in progress in relation to the previous situation. However, at that time, there was no strategic document to address adequate measures to involve other underrepresented and vulnerable groups in higher education. Therefore, this was one of the reasons for creating the National Plan for Enhancing Social Dimension (2018), which will be analysed in the following chapters of this thesis.

### 3 METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

To discuss the aim of this research and find an answer to the posed research questions, I adopted a qualitative research approach with the use of thematic analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse chosen higher education policies in Croatia according to the markers and indicators of the 4A Framework, which will be discussed in detail later in this chapter. According to Gunn (2015, p. 38), official policy documents or legislative documents, national or institutional, provide valuable information for analysing official definitions of different social phenomena. Educational policy documents provide a set of guidelines, principles, and goals for an organization of the whole education system, influencing actions related to positioning young people in society. Hence, data used for the analysis are two official policy documents of Croatian policy agenda on higher education: Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (2014) and National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia 2019 – 2021 (2018).

#### **Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (2014)**

The Croatian Parliament adopted the Strategy of Education, Science and Technology on October 17, 2014. Croatian Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (in further text: the Strategy) emerged from the different demographic, economic and cultural changes that Croatian society was facing, and which are still relevant. According to the Strategy (2014), it is the responsibility of the state to develop and manage its own education system while cooperating with the private sector. The Strategy proposes measures that are in line with the strategies of the European Union and objectives expected to be met by 2025. The Strategy is based on different Croatian policy documents which aim at improving education and the science system. Moreover, the Strategy aims at establishing a comprehensive, flexible, and efficient system that includes all forms and levels of education and research. It is based on the idea of Croatia as a society in which high-quality education influences the life of every individual, its relationships in society and economic development.

The Strategy addresses all levels of education, from early childhood education and care to adult education and lifelong learning. However, for the purpose of this thesis, I will analyse its parts relevant to higher education as the rest of the Strategy goes beyond the scope of this research. Universities play a crucial role in the implementation of the measures proposed by the Strategy as they are places where “new knowledge is created and transferred to students and other beneficiaries” (Strategy 2014, p 20).

## **National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia 2019 – 2021 (2018)**

Ministers of higher education of countries included in the Bologna Process adopted the Strategy for Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the European Higher Education Area by 2020 in 2015, during the ministerial conference in Yerevan (Yerevan Communiqué, 2015). In this Strategy, ministers committed to the development of national policies aiming to ensure access to quality higher education for all, especially for students from underrepresented and vulnerable groups.

The Republic of Croatia recognised 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. National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education (in further text: the National Plan) in Croatia was adopted on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of January 2019, following the emphasis put on the social dimension of higher education in different ministerial declarations and communiqués mentioned earlier in Chapter 2 (Ministry of Science and Education, 2019). With the adoption, Croatia became one of three European Union countries that have a specific strategic document for enhancing the social dimension of higher education (National Plan, 2018, p. 4).

National Plan was created and adopted to identify different underrepresented and vulnerable groups in higher education and to propose and adopt specific objectives, measures, and activities to ensure access to higher education, successful and inclusive learning, completion of studies and integration into the labour market. The National Plan was included in data analysis as it offers background for enhancing social dimension in higher education, describes vulnerable and underrepresented groups, and most relevant, it proposes measures and activities to ensure greater access to higher education for all students and aims to recognise inclusiveness as an advantage and opportunity. Its content is, therefore, relevant for addressing posed research questions, and its analysis is offered in the following paragraphs and chapters.

### 3.1 Qualitative research

There are many possibilities, methods, and frameworks for conducting qualitative research, and there is no ideal way of conducting it. However, it is important to find the method which aligns with the purpose of the given research, theoretical framework and assumptions, and research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80, 2020 p. 2). Qualitative research does not represent a single research approach but rather pluralism of different epistemological perspectives, which created a range of approaches such as phenomenology, ethnography, narrative inquiry, discourse analysis, and others. (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013, p. 398). The main characteristic of qualitative research may be developed as including multiple realities, understanding viewpoints of research participants, identifying approaches to understand the chosen phenomena in depth. (Vaismoradi, et al., 2013, p. 398.) Common to all qualitative research is the goal of understanding a certain phenomenon. The value of the qualitative approach is that it enables the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning, and in education, it is often used to explore complex phenomena which participants encounter (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018 p. 2). As Braun and Clarke (2019, p. 591) state, qualitative research is about “meaning and meaning-making”, with qualitative data analysis being about telling, creating, and interpreting stories and finding the meaning in the chosen data. Qualitative researchers, according to Braun and Clarke (2019, p. 592), are always reflecting, learning, and evolving. Because of the descriptive nature of qualitative approaches, the researcher may build a holistic picture of a phenomenon in a chosen setting. Moreover, qualitative research and analysis always involve theoretical assumptions and choices (Braun & Clarke, 2020 p. 3). Acknowledging our own theoretical positions is an important step in doing qualitative research. In addition, it is important that the theoretical position is made clear and explicit (although often this is left unspoken, according to Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80; 2020b p. 2). Understanding and acknowledging our own theoretical position needs to be reflected during the whole process of conducting research.

In the context of this thesis, I will apply a reflexive thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach was designed to be used within the qualitative research paradigm, putting emphasis on an active role of the researcher. Reflexive thematic analysis will be further explained in the following paragraphs.

### 3.2 Reflexive thematic analysis

*“Thematic analysis involves the searching across a data set – be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts – to find repeated patterns of meaning.”*

*(Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 86)*

According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 77), thematic analysis was rarely acknowledged, but a widely used method, and as stated by Vaismoradi and co-authors (2013, p. 400), it has sometimes been referred to as a part of phenomenology or even completely ignored as a qualitative method in research textbooks. However, more recently, it has been acknowledged as a distinct method (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 589). The version of thematic analysis which Braun and Clarke developed, and which is the one cited throughout this thesis became one of the most widely cited versions of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2017, p. 297; 2019 p. 590).

Although thematic analysis is generally considered a fundamental approach suitable to be used by novice researchers, this does not mean that they produce low-quality findings or that it lacks analytical power and sophistication (Vaismoradi, et al., 2013, p. 404; Braun & Clarke 2020b p. 2). Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 77) advocate for thematic analysis as a flexible and useful method in qualitative research from their early work. What differentiates thematic analysis from other qualitative analytic approaches is that thematic analysis offers a method that is not theoretically informed, and therefore it can be applied through different theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 297). Thematic analysis is a method for “identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006 p. 79.)

Moreover, thematic analysis is flexible in terms of theoretical frameworks, but also in research questions and their evolution, data collection and the size of the sample (Braun & Clarke 2017, p. 297). It can be used to analyse small and big data sets, varying from the small case studies which interview few participants to large scale studies with many participants. However, it is important to mention that thematic analysis is not “omni-method”, and it does not suit all qualitative research designs (Braun & Clarke 2017, p. 298). Thematic analysis is a form of qualitative analysis that does not require the same detailed theoretical, and technical knowledge that approaches like discourse analysis does (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80), and it offers more accessible and flexible analysis, especially for novice researchers.

Nonetheless, it is important to remember that thematic analysis is not simply a collection of data extract put together without analytic narrative, and it is neither a selection of data extracts

with comments that paraphrase their content (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 94). Similarities and overlaps can be found between thematic analysis and other analytic research methods such as discourse analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, content analysis, and grounded theory. In the scope of this research, I will only focus on thematic analysis without describing its difference and similarities with other research methods, but it is important to mention that they exist and sometimes overlap.

Braun and Clarke (2020a, p. 2, 2020b, p. 1) state that thematic analysis is best described as a “family” or “spectrum” of methods, not as a method with one set of procedures. Moreover, it aims to identify and interpret key features of the data guided by the posed research questions. Research questions in the thematic analysis are not fixed, and it is possible that they evolve throughout coding and theme development (Braun & Clarke 2017, p. 297).

There are different approaches to thematic analysis, from coding reliability, which prioritise coding accuracy, to reflexive approaches, which put emphasise the subjectivity of data analysis. Researchers should be aware of which one suits their research the best (Braun & Clarke 2019, p. 595; 2020a p. 3; 2020b p. 1). In coding reliability approach themes are understood as summaries and typically require multiple coders to apply the chosen coding frame to the data and researchers’ subjectivity is seen as a bias and potential risk to coding reliability. This approach is labelled as a “small q” approach. On the other side, reflexive approaches in data analysis (Braun & Clarke 2019, p. 596; 2020a, p. 3) use themes developed from codes and described as “patterns of shared meaning underpinned by the central organising concept” (Braun & Clarke 2020a, p. 3) Moreover, themes do not simply exist without the researchers, therefore, this approach emphasises the subjectivity of data interpretation (Braun & Clarke 2020b, p- 3). The third approach category is codebook approaches which combine the values of reflexive thematic analysis with the structured approach to coding (Braun & Clarke 2020b, p. 3).

In their more recent work, Braun and Clarke (2019, p. 590) decided to label the described thematic analysis as “reflexive thematic analysis”, which considers the central role of the researcher and his subjectivity and reflexivity. In addition, Braun and Clarke (2019, p. 594) advocate for an active and reflexive role of a researcher throughout the research process; researchers need to be aware of the decision making around analysis as they engage with making the decision about the data.

Although there are many similarities with qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis, the critical form of reflexive thematic analysis is more appropriate when researchers are new to qualitative research since reflexive thematic analysis offers practical guidance (Braun & Clarke 2020, p. 8). In contrast with discourse analysis, reflexive thematic analysis does not provide tools for detailed analysis of language practice. (Braun & Clarke 2020, p. 7). In this thesis, I will apply reflexive thematic analysis. The reflexive thematic analysis represents “Big Q”, qualitative research that is qualitative in techniques and underlying research values, so to say, “fully qualitative” (Braun & Clarke 2020, p. 3)

### **3.3 Themes in thematic analysis**

Part of the flexibility of thematic analysis, according to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 82), is that it allows researchers to determine themes in many ways. However, for the thematic analysis to be successful, it needs “to make sure that the interpretations of the data are consistent with the theoretical framework” (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 95). Themes have been associated with different definitions and different terms such as unit of analysis, domain, process, category, or phase (Vaismoradi, et al., 2013, p. 401). Themes, as such, are not simply emerging from the data “waiting to be identified and retrieved by the researcher”. Themes, in contrast, are “interpretive stories about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher’s theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data itself” (Braun & Clarke 2006 p. 80; 2019 p. 594). As described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 83), themes within data can be identified in two ways: the inductive (bottom-up) approach or the deductive (theoretical, top-down) approach. The inductive approach strongly links identified themes to the data itself without trying to fit into an already existing coding framework. Deductive thematic analysis, in contrast, is linked with the researcher’s interest in the area, and it is more analyst driven.

Moreover, themes can be characterized as latent (interpretative) or semantic (explicit) themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 83; 2020, p. 3), thematic analysis primarily focuses on one of these levels, so it is important to make a decision about the level at which themes are identified. Within a semantic approach, themes are identified within the specific data set, not looking beyond anything that has not been written or said. The latent approach goes beyond simply the semantic content of the data, and it looks for underlying ideas, conceptualisations and assumptions which shape and inform the semantic content of the data. The latent approach tends to be linked with a constructionist paradigm, and in this form, it somehow overlaps with

discourse analysis. Development of the themes in latent thematic analysis the produced analysis is not just a description of data, but it is already theorised (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84).

In this thesis, I use deductive thematic analysis as I already have a pre-existing coding framework for a specific research question. The deductive thematic analysis provides a less detailed description of overall data, but it provides a more detailed analysis of specific aspects of the chosen data set. Moreover, deductive approach requires early engagement with the literature prior to analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). As I engaged with the literature much earlier than even deciding the exact form of the research, the knowledge I got from the existing literature surely affected the way of conducting this research. Within the scope of this thesis, I will do a deductive thematic analysis at the latent, interpretative level.

### **3.4 4A Framework summarised**

All four key dimensions explained below are equally important in creating a truly inclusive education system. This framework was adjusted for the higher education context and expanded with additional maker – affordability, as it represents one of the main challenges in higher education in recent times.

Availability includes two obligations from the government, and it looks at the right of education as a civic and political right on one side and as a social and economic right, meaning that it requires the government to permit the establishment of education institutions (including higher education institutions) by different actors, but also requires the government to establish them or fund them themselves (Tomaševski, 2001b p. 13). Governmental obligation to make education available is often associated with the provision of education (Tomaševski, 2001b p. 19). Shortly, educational institutions and programmes have to be available in sufficient quantity (Shaeffer, 2008 p. 88). In practice, this means that educational provision should have adequate geographical coverage, infrastructure and teachers equipped to support the delivery of education (Barros & Biasin, 2019 p. 482).

Accessibility, by Tomaševski (2001b p. 13), is defined differently for different educational levels. Governments are obliged to guarantee access for all to the free compulsory level of education (usually primary education). Nevertheless, they are not obliged to guarantee access for all to secondary and tertiary education. Post-compulsory education can require tuition fees and other charges, and the increasing trend of charging fees is contrary to the idea of international human rights law. Educational institutions and programmes have to be accessible by everyone, on a non-discrimination basis, especially to the most vulnerable and marginalized



groups. Accessibility, in the context of this thesis, refers to physical accessibility, meaning that education has to be within safe physical reach (either geographically or via modern technology) and access to information. Access to education should be guided by non-discrimination, which is an overarching principle of international human rights law, and it applies to all rights (Tomaševski, 2001b p. 27).

Acceptability mainly refers to the quality of education, meaning that education has to be of good quality. Therefore, governments should make sure that education that is provided is available, accessible and of good quality. Curriculum, teaching methods, the form and the substance of education have to be relevant, culturally appropriate and of good quality to be acceptable. Moreover, acceptability also refers to the language of instructions, especially when it comes to secure the rights to education for indigenous people or minority (Tomaševski, 2001b p. 13). Minimal standards of safety, health and professional requirements for teachers have to be enforced by the government.

Adaptability has been best conceptualized through addressing the right to education of children with disabilities (Tomaševski, 2001b p. 15). Education, in general, needs to be flexible in adapting and responding to the global challenges and the needs of changing societies and students. Education needs to be adapted to individual's future and their prospects in supporting themselves.

Affordability refers to the economic accessibility of educational systems and educational institutions (education has to be affordable to all). In the original framework by Tomaševski, the accessibility marker also included economic accessibility. While it may be included under the mentioned marker, in the context of this thesis, I decided to expand the framework with additional marker – affordability. The 4A framework was modified by Maxwell and Granlund (2011) and a fifth marker, affordability was added. This expanded model was further used in other studies such as the study conducted by Raamahlo et al. (2018) which inspired me to use the expanded 4A Framework.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

After establishing the methodology framework for this research, I will apply thematic analysis with the 4A framework on the chosen data set in the following paragraphs. In this research, I applied already pre-determined coding and thematic framework. Therefore, my data analysis consisted of identifying these established themes in the chosen data set. The data set in this research is identified by the interest in the particular topic within the data. Data item refers to a

specific piece of collected data that together create data set. The data item in this research refers to Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (2014) and the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia 2019 – 2021 (2018).

The reflexive thematic analysis approach consists of six phases: familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing (Braun & Clarke 2006, p 87; 2020, p 3), and those 6 phases will be used in the following paragraphs to describe data analysis and findings and discussion chapter of this thesis.

### 3.5.1 Phase 1: familiarising yourself with your data

According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87), it is crucial to know data very well before coding, which usually asks for active repeated reading of the data, searching for patterns, meanings and connections. I read the data twice before starting the analysis. The first reading was simply familiarisation with the content of policy documents, while during the second reading, I started noting down some patterns and meanings. During this step, I also decided to not include certain policy documents in the data analysis as it goes beyond the scope of this research, however, these documents will be used to discuss the findings. In addition, during this step, I decided not to use the whole text of the Strategy but only focused on the parts relevant to higher education and relevant to address research questions.

### 3.5.2 Phase 2 and 3: coding and generating initial themes

According to Braun and Clarke (2019, p. 594), coding, guided by a pre-determined coding frame, refers to a process of identifying material relevant to each overarching theme. Themes are conceptualised as “patterns of shared meaning” or united by a “central organizing concept” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593). However, themes are not, as sometimes presented, summaries of data domains. Domain summary themes, according to Braun and Clarke (2019, p. 593), are under-developed themes, and as such, they are not suitable with their approach to thematic analysis. Moreover, data analysis is not a linear process; it is more of a circular process where researchers move “back and forth as needed” (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 87). The process of data analysis develops with time and, therefore, should not be rushed. In addition, in the process of coding, the researcher needs to read and re-read the data to become truly familiar with it. The reading of the data occurs multiple times throughout the analysis process. After organizing data in a consistent format, the researcher can start discovering the components of the chosen data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018 p. 2).

Following the second reading and the initial list of ideas, 4A Framework was used to code all parts of data that I found relevant for addressing the posed research questions. The coding system was developed with the use of predefined markers and indicators (from the 4A Framework), which I used as themes for analysing the policies. After developing themes, policy indicators related to higher education context were identified while using indicators by Tomaševski (2001b, p. 13) and Shaeffer (2008, p. 89) as a basis. Identified indicators were used as codes to further analyse the selected policy documents in line with previously developed themes. These indicators included a modification of legislative and policy documents, instructional techniques and pedagogical approaches, academic environments, support structures, resource allocation and removal of additional barriers to education (Schaefer, 2008, p. 89) to embrace the richness of diversity.

Moreover, as I used an already established framework for coding and establishing themes, the two phases were combined. I reread the data again to ensure the right appropriation of codes and themes. It was also in this step that I decided to use an additional dimension of affordability.

### 3.5.3 Phase 4: reviewing and developing themes

During this step, it is worth considering “internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). I reviewed the coded data extracts again to see whether they are used in an appropriate way in relation to the policy document overall. This was done separately for the National Plan and for the Strategy.

### 3.5.4 Phase 5: refining, defining and naming themes

After the themes were reviewed again, the final modifications of the thematic map were done. The themes are presented for analysis, and I analysed data within them. In this step, it is important to identify ‘the essence’ of what each theme is about separately and overall (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 92). An important part of this step is that analysis does not mean just paraphrasing the content of chosen data extracts, but it is important to identify why they are relevant for addressing the research questions.

The final phase of thematic data analysis is writing the report and reporting the findings. During this phase, the story of data has to be written and told in a way that will convince readers about the validity of the analysis. A written report has to be based on the evidence of themes within the analysed data. I will further present the findings of this thesis and discussion of the findings in the following chapter.

## 4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I will lay down the findings of the reflexive thematic analysis carried out on Strategy for Education, Science, and Technology (2014) (later in the text: the Strategy) and National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia 2019 – 2021 (2018) (later in the text: National Plan). In 2014, the Croatian Parliament adopted the Strategy for Education, Science, and Technology, and it is relevant for all levels of education, from ECEC to lifelong learning. Although I read the whole Strategy, in the context of this thesis, I will mainly focus on the chapter related to higher education as it is the most relevant to the posed research questions. Nevertheless, some other chapters (primary and secondary education; lifelong learning; adult education) also informed this analysis due to their relevance. National Plan was adopted in 2018 and aims to ensure measures in enhancing the social dimension of higher education from 2019 until 2021. As indicated above, thematic analysis was carried out using 4A Framework by Katarina Tomaševski, with an additional marker of affordability.

The findings discussed here give the answer to the posed research question, which is: *How do official policy documents in Croatian higher education construct the right to higher education for refugees, according to the 4A framework developed by Tomaševski?*

In order to answer the research question, this chapter is organised according to the 4A Framework, with each subtitle discussing relevant findings of the data analysis according to each marker and considering indicators mentioned in the “Data analysis” chapter.

Although it is necessary, it is not enough to simply identify the parts of the traditionally less included population in higher education. The causes of their lower enrolment and involvement should be explored. As mentioned before, the most common causes include lack of financial means to support studying, which is one of the reasons why I decided to include a dimension of affordability as a separate dimension. However, other non-financial reasons which are less mentioned in policy documents should be recognised and tackled. The lack of their recognition leads to the lack of effective mechanisms to remove the challenges and barriers. According to Baričević, Čvrljak and Šelo Šabic (2011, p. 4), the challenges and barriers that refugees in Croatia are facing are in line with main challenges faced by refugees elsewhere (as shown in the Figure 1.). These are: difficult access to Croatian language courses; difficult access to education programs; lack of opportunities for retraining and additional education; difficulties in accessing social rights; low chances for employment; social isolation. These challenges

further complicate already complex process of accessing higher education (Streitwieser et al., 2020, p. 11). Moreover, an additional challenge is the development of soft skills and academic culture skills since they can impact the way refugees will search for relevant information, write essays, or understand plagiarism (Streitwieser et al., 2020, p. 12). Since all students do not commonly share these challenges in Croatia, educational policy measures should be aimed at successfully eliminating inequalities caused by these challenging circumstances of study (Fernell et al., 2014, p. 38).

Since there has been an increase in the number of refugees, the need has arisen for establishing more effective mechanisms of social integration in all areas, especially in the areas of education and the labour market. The report by CPS (2012, p 16) states that when looking into integration to the education system, specific focus has to be given on three equally important areas: the integration of children refugees and interculturalism in schools, adult language courses and access to the accessibility of higher education for refugees. Therefore, with this analysis, I aim to identify how the right to higher education for refugees is constructed in two official policy documents, according to the 4A markers.

According to the Strategy (2014), higher education institutions have a crucial role in the implementation of the measures for the achievement of the strategic goals, as they have an active role in the creation and implementation of the educational process. In addition, higher education institutions are the places “where new knowledge is created and transferred to students and other beneficiaries” (the Strategy, 2014, p. 20).

#### **4.1 Availability**

Availability marker examines whether education is generally available. The need to develop the Strategy for Education, Science and Technology was based on the changes that Croatian society was (and still is) facing, such as changes connected with globalisation, application of new technologies, and limited human, material and natural resources (The Strategy, 2014, p. 18). To overcome these challenges and to reach the “level of highly developed countries, Croatia has to be an open, mobile and innovative society” (The Strategy, 2014, p. 18). The mentioned changes have major societal impacts and ask for the re-examination of the whole educational system, from ECEC to adult education (The Strategy, 2014, p. 19). According to the Strategy (2014), the mission of the whole educational system in Croatia is to “ensure high-quality education available to all” (p. 21). This refers to education in general, therefore, taking higher education into account. The responsibility for developing and managing the educational

system lies on the State, in cooperation with the private sector. National Plan (2018) is closely connected to and build on the foundation set in The Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (2014). Among the main objectives of the Strategy relating to higher education is ensuring “the availability of higher education to everyone, in accordance with the individual ability” (the Strategy, 2014, p. 17), while “the inclusion of under-represented groups in the higher education system is one of the priorities for the development of education in Croatia” (National Plan, 2018, p. 7). According to the National Plan, Croatia and its higher education policy agenda should understand “higher education as a public good that has to be available to everyone, regardless of their social, economic or any other status” (National Plan, 2018, p. 5). Thus, leading to a society that integrates differences and respects all citizens equally. Moreover, National Plan serves as an encouragement to the academic community to “demonstrate social responsibility and to recognise inclusiveness as an advantage and opportunity to adopt new ideas, approaches, and solutions” (National Plan 2018, p. 4). It should also represent “a basis for further research and developing new theories and practices in reaching out to all potential students” (National Plan, 2018, p. 4). These statements suggest that National Plan should be taken as the first step towards inclusive higher education for all, and the ideas set out in it could and should be used as an inspiration for further research and studies, all aiming at making Croatia a country of knowledge, and a country of equal opportunities for everyone (National Plan, 2018, p 4).

Furthermore, sub-objective 6.1 of the National Plan (2018, p. 19) aims at improving processes for management and institutional policymaking related to increasing the availability of higher education. This activity is of great importance as it tackles institutional policymaking, which is also in line with the indicators suggested by Schaefer (2008, p. 89). Policies and institutional strategic documents should aim at increasing accessibility and availability of higher education to vulnerable groups. This also refers to refugees being one of the identified vulnerable groups.

Over the last decades, the Croatian higher education system has expanded, in line with the massification trends in other countries (Doolan et al., 2018, p. 468). The number of study programmes has increased more than threefold (the Strategy, 2014, p. 147). This is due to the establishment of new higher education institutions as well as the result of modifying and dividing already existing study programmes into Bachelor and Master programmes following the Bologna Process. As mentioned earlier in the chapter devoted to Croatian higher education, study programmes are predominantly in social sciences and humanities. Higher education institutions are situated in all regions of the country. However, according to the Strategy (2014,

p- 154), the number of institutions surpasses the national potential and available resources. Due to a relatively small higher education market, new study programmes were often introduced in different regions of the country, leading to “an unjustified boom in the number of higher education institutions, as well as to a lack of quality” (the Strategy, 2014, p. 154). Although a number of new higher education institutions were established, their role and status remain uncertain (Lučin & Samaržija, 2012, p. 37), and although the expansion of higher education globally increased opportunities for diversified access of various social groups, inequalities still remain (Pherali & Moghli, 2019, p. 5). Therefore, we can conclude that there is a sufficient number of higher education institution which should address the need of all individuals for higher education, as well as for refugees. According to the Agency for Science and Higher Education (2020), in 2020 there was 12 957 places left in the full-time studies of the public universities. Looking into the availability marker, it seems that there are enough higher education institutions available in Croatia. Nevertheless, if the system is of questionable quality, is it really ensuring the successful integration of refugee students in society, in the labour market and for the future? According to Kurelic and Rodin (2012, p 48), if the available higher education is not of good quality, it is socially unjust and inefficient. This can be connected with the quality aspect, further analysed under the acceptability marker.

Moreover, the Strategy recognises the gaps in current higher education provision. A detailed analysis of the higher education system is needed and will be done, and enrolment quotas will be re-defined. While re-defining quotas, “special attention will be paid to real social needs” (the Strategy, 2014 p 159). This implies that the study programmes will be in line with the contemporary societal needs, but also considering the future, therefore, the re-defined enrolment quotas and details analysis of the system should answer the needs and challenges currently faced, including access of refugees to higher education.

Although the marker of availability is addressed in both policy documents, in comparison with the other markers, this one received the least attention in the chapters relevant for the analysis of higher education.

## **4.2 Accessibility**

Accessibility is defined differently for different educational levels, however in all cases, it should be guided by non-discrimination as an overarching principle of international human rights law, and it applies to all rights (Tomaševski, 2001b p. 13; p. 27). For refugees to exercise

their right to higher education, higher education needs to be accessible to them (Streitwieser, 2020 p. 6).

According to the Strategy (2014, p. 18), all persons, especially the ones at risk of marginalisation and exclusion, will be included in the educational system in which human rights will be respected. This sounds like an inclusive mission and vision of the educational system in general, but it is still to be seen how it turned out in practice.

The ability to review, analyse, address, and solve the most complex challenges requires competencies acquired through higher education (the Strategy, 2014, p. 145). This implies that higher education has a key role in all social changes. Therefore, higher education should be accessible for all students, including refugee students. Moreover, higher education institutions are of special public interest in Croatia (the Strategy, 2014, p. 145). In line with the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (Article 66, 2010, p. 9) and the Law on Scientific activities and higher education (Article 77, 2003, p. 22), analysed higher education policies address the importance of non-discrimination and inclusion of all students. In addition, this corresponds to the international recommendations related to non-discrimination in higher education. The inclusion of refugees as one of the vulnerable groups in higher education systems is one of the priorities for developing an inclusive European Higher Education Area. Therefore, Strategy (2014, p. 184) states that comprehensive policy will be developed for the inclusion of vulnerable groups. In the chapter about EHEA and Bologna Process, I discussed Bologna Ministerial Communiqués, which showed the importance of the social dimension of higher education and asked for participating countries to commit themselves to the development of effective policies aimed at ensuring greater access to higher education for vulnerable groups, including refugees. National Plan aims to contribute to the mentioned objectives in the context of Croatian higher education. Moreover, the Strategy (2014, p. 184) mentions that the cross-sectoral national working group on social dimension will be established as well as that national action plan for improving social dimension will be developed and implemented. This was done with the National Plan in 2018, and it shows the consistency among Strategy and the National Plan. Therefore, the analysis of both documents represents a valuable source of information for this thesis and answer to the research question.

According to the Article 70 of the International and Temporary Protection Act (2015, p. 31), refugees have the right to higher education under the same conditions as Croatian citizens in accordance with special regulations. Therefore, from the legal point of view, once refugee status



is recognised (asylum or similar protection has been granted), there is no restriction in applying for higher education. However, it is not clear what special regulations are.

Furthermore, objective 3 of the National Plan (2018, p. 13) aims to provide equal opportunities for all students, including vulnerable students and refugees, during their studies, thus aiming to remove systematic barriers and challenges that deprive and oppress individuals during the early stages of studies. Inclusive higher education policies require a holistic and comprehensive approach which has to begin early (Streitwieser et al., 2020, p. 14). This shows the importance of the educational system as a whole, not only focusing on higher education level but taking a holistic approach at all educational levels. In addition, according to Altıok and co-authors (2021, p. 9), literature regarding students' access to higher education shows the importance of connection to focus on inclusion and access through all educational levels, and not only focusing on higher education level.

In 2018 Croatian government created an Action plan for the Integration of Beneficiaries of International Protection (2017-2019), and the report on its implementation was used to advise the discussion part of the thesis. The report on the implementation of measures from the mentioned Action Plan for 2017 and 2018 was published at the end of 2019 and provides information on how certain measures were implemented. Measure 10.1. states that children and young people should be involved in the educational system at all levels as soon as possible. According to the report, this measure was implemented, but it only states concrete actions on the level of primary and secondary education. Nevertheless, objective 10. Specifically aims to "improve access to education for all age groups with the aim of continuing education and employability" (Action Plan for the Integration of Beneficiaries of International Protection, 2019, p. 30).

According to the Strategy, all students should be included in the educational system, and the system should take into consideration the educational needs of all students and adult learners, "especially those who are exposed to marginalisation and exclusion" (2014, p. 49). Moreover, in addressing the right to education, the Strategy states that all students are "entitled to achieve their highest educational potential; the equality of educational opportunities is based on social justice; education cannot be privileges of a minority nor can they be limited due to differences on the basis of ethnicity, sex, gender or other socially conditioned differences" (the Strategy, 2014, p. 49). Therefore, access to education should be granted to all students, including refugee students.

The Strategy acknowledges the inequalities in access to higher education for certain groups as they encounter more financial difficulties and higher workload burden (2014, p. 181). Although it does not explicitly mention refugees, this could be because of the timing and context when Strategy was developed (before the refugee crisis in 2015). Later, in the National Plan (2018), refugees are recognised as a vulnerable group and attention has been given to the challenges and barriers in their access to higher education. This indicates that policies are changing and evolving as well as societal challenges are changing. According to Tecilazic Gorsic (2017, p. 447), the reactions of the academic community in Croatia so far demonstrate a division of attitudes towards the idea of social integration of refugees. On the one hand, there are certain hesitations of formal structures towards proposals for positive discrimination of refugees in the form of allowing flexible access to higher education. On the other hand, there is an increase among academic activists in asking the government and public institutions to initiate the development of integration programs for refugees (Tecilazic Gorsic, 2017, p. 447).

Furthermore, the social dimension of Croatian higher education has been addressed in different documents preceding the National Plan. For example, agreements for co-financing the costs of study of full-time students for the academic years 2015/2016, 2016/2017, and 2017/2018. In these agreements, two of the three objectives were related to the social dimension of higher education. The first one is aimed at ensuring equal access to higher education for all full-time students in the Republic of Croatia, while the second one included encouragement of completion of higher education (National Plan, 2018, p. 8).

The connectedness of access to higher education and its completion is visible in different policy document. This goes in line with the recent policy agendas and research recommendations to move from aiming at greater access without following the participation and completion aspect. Access to higher education for refugees is just a part of enhancing the social dimension and higher education as a pathway to integration, therefore, participation, completion and further career development needs to be included in the key policy documents (Morrice, 2013, p. 653). Measure 6.2.4. of the Strategy (2014, p. 185) states that an integrated system for monitoring the enrolment, participation, and completion of students from vulnerable groups, including refugees, needs to be developed. From the information available at the time of writing this thesis, the system has not yet been developed. In addition, objective 4 of the National Plan (2018, p. 14) aims at increasing the completion rate of vulnerable groups and their employment rate after graduation. This shows the importance of higher education as a pathway to integration into the labour market after completion. The Strategy (2014, p. 145) aims to lead to the overall

accessibility of higher education. This overall accessibility should then result in “greater social equity, in a wider pool for hiring future experts and in an increased proportion of the population with a higher education degree, which directly influences the overall quality of social relations” (the Strategy, 2014, p. 146). Here we can see the aim to make higher education accessible for all and the connection between education, economy, and labour market. The Strategy (2014) mentions links to the labour market and economic development in different parts of the document, therefore showing the importance and connectedness of higher education in successful integration to the labour market. When talking about refugees, this connection is a very important aspect as it is a crucial factor in successful integration. Considering the challenges refugees face when accessing the labour market, one way could be through higher education, which focuses on encouraging study programmes for under-represented jobs in the current system as they are expected to positively influence the economy but on the society as a whole. In addition to education, employment is a central part of the integration process, and it is crucial for the participation of refugees in society and its development (CPS, 2012 p. 14). Work experience should be obtained already at the level of higher education, with different internships and traineeships provided. The important and crucial point here is the removal of administrative and other obstacles for introducing student work placements, with the emphasis on barriers for vulnerable groups (National Plan, p. 14). These administrative barriers are especially relevant for refugee students.

#### 4.2.1 Access to information

Access to information about the application procedures and assisting refugees in choosing higher education and identifying their interest has an important role in their successful enrolment, participation, and completion of higher education. National Plan mentions the importance of non-financial support, including the availability of information for refugee students. As the access to information is one of the biggest challenges for their access to higher education (Gateley, 2015, p. 30, Bajwa et al., 2017, p. 59), it is important to ensure the availability of information, including on the websites of higher education institutions and other forms of information (National Plan, 2018, p 13). In addition, Brown and co-authors (2016, p. 105) state the importance of social media in information sharing for prospective students. Nevertheless, for students with limited or no access to the internet, there is a need for alternative models of information sharing.

Measure 10.3. of the Action plan for the Integration of Beneficiaries of International Protection (2017-2019) (p. 30) aims to adapt the information system for enrolment in higher education institutions for refugee students, and it has also been partly implemented, however in 2018, Croatian Agency for Higher Education did not have any application from refugee students to enrol higher education institution. Nevertheless, according to the CPS report (2012, p. 29), in 2012, there was a number of refugees trying to access higher education, with only one being successful in doing so. Therefore, it shows that even before Croatia gave more attention to refugees and their integration, there was interest from refugees to access higher education.

According to the Rectors' Conference (2020, p. 5), another challenge regarding access to information is the non-existence of online enrolment services in English, nevertheless, work is underway to enable the English version of the platform. At the moment of writing this thesis, the service is still available only in Croatian.

#### 4.2.2 Recognition of prior learning

Proof of qualifications and transcripts may be hard for refugees to provide because these documents may have been lost or left behind (Pherali & Moghli, 2019, p. 10). However, access to higher education inevitably involves the recognition of a refugee's previous qualifications. Therefore, the basis of any discussion on widening participation in higher education and insurance or equal access is that the access depends on previous educational achievements and recognition of prior learning. A lack of awareness and absence of standardized procedures related to the recognition of prior learning and the specific needs of refugees excludes them from accessing higher education (Streitwieser et al., 2020, p. 1). Recognition of higher education qualifications and prior learning for the purpose of continuing education in the Republic of Croatia is within the responsibility of universities, colleges or polytechnics (Agency for Science and Higher Education, n.d.).

According to Fernell and Kovač (2010, p. 261), research shows that the educational achievements of students belonging to vulnerable groups are lower compared to other traditional students. It is necessary to create a legal basis to ensure that all citizens can use their right to recognition of prior learning (the Strategy, 2014, p. 32). In addition, it is necessary to ensure recognition of ones' knowledge and abilities from an early age and to provide lifelong personal and professional guidance and counselling. Such processes will be built into the education system from ECEC to higher education as well as through public employment service (the Strategy, 2014, p. 26). Moreover, the focus should also be on the recognition of work-based

learning, especially at the level of higher education, since “the exposure to the world of work during education increases the employability of learners” (the Strategy, 2014, p. 24).

Hence, the National plan (2018, p 13) also aims to validate formal and informal learning to enable better recognition of prior learning (Sub-objective 3.3). Recognition of prior learning and qualifications is an especially challenging aspect of ensuring access to higher education for refugees. Nevertheless, it represents a key to building inclusive societies and eliminating the risk of social alienation (Yilzid, 2019 p. 10). In the EHEA, The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon Convention) provides a legal framework for the recognition of qualifications held by refugees. The Convention has been ratified by 54 countries, including Croatia.

This can be connected to Measure 10.4. of the Action plan for the Integration of Beneficiaries of International Protection (2017-2019) (p. 16) aiming to ensure recognition of educational qualifications and prior learning in cases when they cannot obtain the acquired diplomas and other documents confirming the previous level of education. The measure has been partly implemented, stating that the level of interest of refugee students to access higher education is still marginalised.

The Rectors' Conference of the Republic of Croatia (2015, p. 7) mentions that higher education institutions may organise qualification examinations for the enrolment of refugee students in the first year of study. In addition, to ensure the successful integration of refugee students into the higher education system, higher education institutions will start working on a system regarding the recognition of prior learning, including all necessary procedures and defining the necessary learning outcomes. Higher education institutions should develop individualised systems and procedures for the evaluation of prior knowledge and skills that will be aimed at the inclusion of refugees either in further education or in the labour market (Tecilazic Gorsic 2017, p. 445).

At the Rectors' Conference in September 2019, the Draft Proposal of the Law on Recognition of Foreign Qualifications was presented. The aim of the law should be to enable individuals to continue their education and be more easily included in the education and labour market. In addition, in Croatia, the recognition of prior learning for entering the labour market is under the responsibility of the Agency for Higher Education, while the recognition or prior learning for accessing higher education is supervised by the higher education institutions themselves (Rectors' Conference, September 2019, p. 4). However, at the moment of writing this thesis, a

new law has still not been adopted, and the Law from 2004 is still in use. In addition, one of the goals of the EHEA and Bologna Process is to enable automatic recognition of prior learning and qualifications. However, this has not yet been achieved, and the need is especially strong to enable adequate recognition procedures regarding the qualifications of refugees (Klemenčič, 2018, p. 375).

#### 4.2.3 Refugees as domestic or international students

Another challenge related to the access to higher education and recognition of prior learning is how refugee students are classified when trying to access higher education as domestic students (Croatian citizens) or international students. Refugees hold the specific status of being both domestic and international students at the same time (Stevenson & Willot, 2007, p. 14.; Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018, p. 14;). According to Oliver and Hughes (2018, p. 138), refugees would be classified as international students, implying that their fees would be international ones. Nonetheless, refugee students are more likely to live in poverty and are not perceived as the international economic capital of higher education institutions. They are often perceived as a difficulty since many of them require financial help in order to access higher education (Stevenson & Willot, 2007, p. 684; Maringe, Ojo & Chiramba, 2017, p. 2223; Streitwieser, et al., 2018, p. 246). According to Streitwieser and co-authors (2017, p. 243), university spots for refugees should not be given just for humanitarian reasons.

From the information and literature available in the Croatian context, it is not clear how refugee students are classified – as international students coming from non-EU countries or as domestic students. This has been an important point of discussion, and according to the documents mentioned before, refugees in Croatian higher education have the same rights as Croatian citizens. Therefore, refugees should be classified as Croatian citizens. Nevertheless, equalization of rights to work education with the rights of Croatian citizens according to special regulations insufficiently recognises the specificity of this vulnerable group (Tecilazic Gorsic, 2017 p. 441). According to the report by CPS (2012, p. 39), that is a form of discrimination because it aims to treat people in different positions equally, while the position of power is different. Members of refugee communities are facing a different situation in which they are in unequal economic, political, and social position in relation to the native-born population (Tecilazic Gorsic 2017, p. 440). This should certainly be considered when designing policies for access to higher education.

According to the report by CPS (2012, p. 39), perhaps a less complex way to access higher education would be to apply as a foreign citizen. That increases the chances of getting enrolled, as not many foreign citizens apply for higher education in Croatia. However, this is not a solution as it brings additional financial challenge as tuition fees for foreign citizens are not the same as for Croatian citizens. This shows the importance of adjusting access to higher education for refugees and the recognition of their prior learning in order to minimise social inequalities in higher education for refugees. It is the responsibility of policymakers and the higher education sector to collaborate in order to fulfil refugees' rights to education, regardless of their citizenship status (Streitwieser et al. 2020, p. 6).

### **4.3 Acceptability**

Acceptability evaluates the various aspects of the content of education, therefore, for the acceptability marker to be addressed and reached, education has to be of high quality, with relevant and culturally appropriate curriculum and teaching methods and language of instructions. According to Fernell and Kovač (2010, p. 263), the mechanisms for widening the participation in higher education must address the key elements: educational institutions on the levels preceding higher education, employers (to ensure better employability of graduates), and families and local community (for more information about the importance of inclusion in higher education and strengthening the support). National Plan and Strategy address all levels of education as important factors in increasing the social dimension of higher education. Moreover, both analysed documents highlight the role of the wider community in the establishment of an inclusive society for all. The Strategy (2014, p. 49) explicitly mentions genuine respect for human rights and human dignity (in education and in general). In addition, cultural differences need to be understood and accepted in order to reduce existing inequalities and prejudices (the Strategy, 2014, p. 50).

Higher education should be constantly adjusted with the requirements of high-quality education and changes in the wider social context (the Strategy, 2014, p. 147). According to the Strategy (2014, p. 48), material and technical resources, information and communication technologies, and hygienic conditions need to be met and ensure the achievement of high-quality education. The quality assurance system in higher education is regulated and institutionalised. However, there is space for improvement as it is focused on the evaluation of procedures, but it lacks verification of efficiency as a key quality indicator (the Strategy, 2014 p. 30). The inadequacy

of quality assurance of education is one factor that leads to mismatches between labour market demand and available educational programmes. Therefore, educational success may not always result in success in the labour market for individuals whose social and cultural capital are not appropriate, especially in the context where political and legal constraints undermine fairness (Pherali & Moghli, 2019, p. 5). According to the Strategy (2014, p. 30), this has also led to different obstacles in enrolling in further education. This could represent another challenge for refugees trying to enrol in higher education, therefore, quality assurance is an important factor that needs to be addressed in order to provide inclusive education for all.

Objective 6 of the National Plan (2018, p. 19) aims at introducing and including standards related to enhancing the social dimension of higher education into the quality assurance system. By improving internal and external quality assurance systems, the existing forms and systems should be used together, and the new ones should be established to enable effective quality assurance (the Strategy, 2014, p. 128). Therefore, quality policies should include enhancing the social dimension as an important factor of the overall quality improvement of higher education, enhancing social inclusiveness for students and employees, and adopting appropriate support structures and bodies that ensure support for vulnerable students. Moreover, the efficiency of the quality assurance system should be determined based on the assessment of activities encouraging and enabling access, support and monitoring participation, completion rates and career development of students from vulnerable groups. The law determines the minimum amount of space that higher education institutions need to ensure in order to obtain approval for teaching students (the Strategy, 2014, p. 178). Yet, spaces at some higher education institutions do not meet the minimum standards of teaching and research and are therefore not acceptable for teaching and learning (the Strategy, p. 178).

Bologna process influenced many important changes in the Croatian higher education system with quality assurance, recognition of prior learning, qualification framework and ECTS as the main ones. Nevertheless, qualification framework, learning outcomes and ECTS are not fully integrated and linked one to another (Lučin & Prijic Samaržija, 2011, p. 38).

Furthermore, attention needs to be given not to organise a one-way higher educational process with the ultimate goal of assimilating a refugee into society and without recognising the active role of refugees in education. Quality and a successful higher educational process should certainly be inclusive, interactive, and based on the values of interculturalism. Intercultural approach to education, which includes a flexible approach to language learning, adapting



teaching materials and creating new ones, additional education of teachers and education professionals who work with refugees can greatly contribute and be used to promote the diversity of a particular society (CPS, 2012, p. 16).

#### **4.4 Adaptability**

Higher education, in general, needs to be flexible in adapting and responding to the global challenges and the needs of changing societies and students. Adaptability markers look at whether education is adapted to the needs of various groups of students. According to the Strategy (2014, p. 19), Croatia strives for a flexible and efficient educational system that considers all levels of education holistically. Thus, the Strategy (2014, p. 19) does “not need only to facilitate the flexibility and adaptability of the education and science systems, but also to make the Strategy itself subject to continual review and to periodic revisions”. This shows the importance of continuous development and improvement of strategic documents and policies, and it should be evidence-based policy making.

Moreover, education needs to be adapted to individual’s future and their prospects in supporting themselves. Higher education institutions and their programs and projects need to adapt to potential students and the wider community's needs. In addition, higher education should be adjusted to acquiring competencies for satisfying social needs (Strategy, 2014 p. 145). This revitalizes the importance of one of the oldest and the most valuable missions of the university - caring for the continuous development and advancement of society as a whole (Fernell & Kovač, 2010, p. 263). The adaptability dimension includes the flexibility of higher education. In the National Plan (2018, p. 13), it is stated that flexibility of study programmes needs to be increased, therefore, addressing the adaptability dimension.

##### **4.4.1 Flexibility**

It can be assumed that initiatives aiming to widen participation in higher education will not increase the number of highly educated people nor change the structure of the population acquiring higher education if successful academic integration of students from vulnerable groups is not ensured. Therefore, the National plan aims at removing barriers during the early stages of studies by developing a study adjustment programme for vulnerable groups within the framework of student counselling (2018, p. 13). The flexibility of higher education is also addressed in a way higher education is organised, thus the National Plan (2018, p. 13) and the

Strategy (2014, p. 151) mentions applying distance learning, hybrid forms of learning, and relaxing the requirement of physical presence. Furthermore, the Strategy (2014, p. 36) mentions the use of digital technologies provides opportunities for adjustment to the needs of all students, and it provides access to a wider range of students, including refugee students. As some refugees are constrained by physical and social mobility, digital technologies can offer unrestricted opportunities for them (Pherali & Moghli, 2019, p. 4). Nevertheless, digital opportunities should not replace the demands from physical universities to facilitate refugee enrolment (Pherali & Moghli, 2019, p. 7). Careful assessment of digital technology in higher education is needed to facilitate possibilities to expand or use them better as a tool for distance learning.

As described before, in the paragraph 2.7.3., Croatian higher education is organised as a full-time and part-time study system. A part-time study system offers a flexible way of organising studies along with potential work, therefore, it could minimise the financial obstacles. However, the part-time study system is not free and therefore, its accessibility is limited. National Plan (objective 3.6, p. 14) recognises the need to adjust and reform the part-time study system by limiting the number of tuition fees in relation to the fees of full-time studies, limiting the number of part-time students and ensure access to student financial support (as meals, accommodation, and student grants) to students from vulnerable groups, including refugees.

#### 4.4.2 Language of instruction

The language of instruction represents a major challenge when refugees try to access higher education and overcoming challenges and barriers related to the language are necessary to succeed in higher education (Streitwieser et al., 2020, p. 3; p. 12). The Strategy (2014, p. 192) encourages teaching in foreign languages and increasing the availability of courses or entire study programmes in English (or another language) in all parts of Croatia. In addition, financial support for teaching in foreign languages should be secured (the Strategy, 2014, p. 193). In the Strategy, foreign language of instructions refers to attracting international students to increase mobility. However, it does not state whether that also implies refugee students. National Plan does not address the issue of language instruction, and as mentioned earlier, higher education in Croatia is almost exclusively organised in the Croatian language. Croatian language courses for refugees are available, but only in few locations (Zagreb or Rijeka). Apart from that, the other difficulty is that the language programme is based on the Croatian - English and Latin script, which refugees in some cases do not understand well enough and therefore cannot fully

use this opportunity (CPS, 2012, p. 39). According to the Rectors' Conference (2020, p. 6), higher education institutions should increase the availability of programmes and degrees in English. According to the Study in Croatia Portal, there are study programmes organised in English, German, Hungarian and Italian. Nevertheless, according to the available list, the majority of programmes in foreign languages are available in private higher education institutions with higher tuition fees.

Ministry of Science and Education needs to assume a greater role in the education of refugees as well as in their learning of the Croatian language as a crucial step of integration. The language courses need to support the early acquisition of the professional vocabulary specific to a certain field. According to Unangst (2019, p. 1515), the language courses need to incorporate professional vocabulary learning in their curricula.

#### 4.4.3 Support structures

In order to provide the necessary support for vulnerable students (including refugees) and for their successful completion of the study programme they enrolled in, the National Plan proposes the enhancement of student support.

Initiatives aiming to widen participation in higher education must be accompanied by measures to ensure the readiness of higher education institutions to accept vulnerable groups of students. According to Fernell and Kovač (2010, p. 262), the responsibility to succeed in higher education is not the sole responsibility of an individual; rather, part of the responsibility is on the higher education institution. Higher education institutions are required to adequately include vulnerable groups in the higher education community and ensure their full participation in that community. National Plan addresses the support in different ways, from self-information systems, professional guidance, student support centres (academic and psychological) that help students achieve skill required for their studies and further career development. In addition, Higher education institutions should be evaluated regarding their support for graduates' early career development and whether the higher education institution meets the requirements of the Croatian Qualifications Framework. (National Plan, 2018, p. 15)

Existing information, counselling and guidance services are not sufficiently accessible and are not adapted to vulnerable groups (the Strategy, 2014 p. 29). Therefore, the Strategy recognises the need to establish a network of support structures easily accessible to all, especially vulnerable youth (the Strategy, 2014, p. 29; p. 162). However, the experience of Croatia indicates that changes may be unsuccessful (even if they are well prepared) if they do not

receive support in their preparation and especially introduction. According to the Strategy (2014, p. 53), one of the success factors for implementing new policies and changes is the development of an efficient support system.

Moreover, to provide necessary support regarding the financial aspects of studying, training of financial planning for successful studies should be introduced and organised in the final grade of secondary education and at higher education level (National plan, 2018, p. 18). Financial factors influencing access and participation in higher education will be further discussed in the paragraph related to the affordability dimension.

As stated in the Strategy (2014, p. 145), the development of higher education in Croatia should lead to the increased competitiveness of students. This competitiveness of students will serve as a basis for increasing the competitiveness of the Croatian economy in Europe and worldwide (the Strategy, 2014, p. 146). Mentioned emphasis on competitiveness corresponds to the neoliberal perspective in higher education and the establishment of a knowledge economy. Although some scholars criticised the employability aspect and emphasis on the knowledge economy, a transition to post-study life is an expected component of higher education (Broms & de Fine Licht, 2019, p. 515). Hence, special attention needs to be given to strengthening the links between universities and the economy, and according to the Strategy (2014, p. 21), “The mission of the Croatian science system is to enhance global knowledge through research and to contribute to the welfare of Croatian society, especially the economy.”

However, according to the Rectors’ Conference (2020, p 5), additional concern about enabling access to higher education and recognition of prior learning for non-EU students, including refugees, is related to the issues of security and national protection of the Republic of Croatia. This shows a different point of view at internationalisation and widening participation in higher education as refugees, and other non-EU students may be denied access to education as a matter of national protection. According to Tecilazic Gorsic (2017, p. 442), we can see the stereotyping of the refugee population as terrorists, with the media playing a strong role in portraying refugees as a threat to European society. Refugees are often defined as a security threat that should be restricted (Ramadan, 2013, p. 65). The media can use this uncertain migration situation to create an atmosphere in which refugees are seen as enemies (Hestermann, 2018, p. 126). Therefore, discrimination and xenophobia represent another significant challenge for refugees in higher education. Refugees may struggle with their past traumatic experiences while simultaneously experiencing additional risks in the new environment (Streitwieser et al., 2020,

p. 12). According to the CPS (2012, p. 19), Croatian society should be more receptive to refugees and enable their full integration. In addition, according to the same report by CPS, refugees in Croatia are discriminated against in multiple ways, and they often encounter xenophobic and racist practices of society.

#### **4.5 Affordability**

As mentioned earlier, in the context of this thesis, I decided to expand the 4A framework with an additional marker – affordability, based on the study by Maxwell and Granlund (2011) and Ramaahlo and co-authors (2018). This was decided because while I was doing the first data analysis, I noticed that affordability and financial challenges and barriers were addressed in different parts of the National Plan and the Strategy, signalling the importance of removing those challenges in order to ensure higher education for vulnerable groups, including refugees. Financial challenges such as paying tuition fees, working while studying, living in more expensive accommodation or away from the place of study, which increases transportation costs, can have a negative impact on access to higher education and the study experience (Farnell et al., 2014, p. 38). In addition, financial support and scholarships for refugee students and vulnerable groups are crucial, as the lack of it prohibits access to higher education (Unangst, 2019, p. 151). Research from some European countries shows that the policy, which was based only on the abolition of tuition fees, has proved insufficient in enabling equal opportunities for access to higher education (Puzic et al., 2006, p. 246). In addition, after decades of free education, there is still a very small group of students with the lower socio-economic status that continues to study at higher education level (Puzic et al., 2006, p. 246).

The provision of scholarships does not always meet indirect costs such as transportation and food. This may enhance the inequalities among refugee students as they may meet all academic prerequisites for scholarships but are unable to meet the additional costs (Pherali & Moghli, 2019, p. 9). Student financial support needs to be reformed in order to increase equity (National Plan, 2018, p. 182) and lead to inclusive higher education for all. In Croatian higher education, financial support consists of direct and indirect measures provided by the state, regional and local authorities, and public and private organisations (the Strategy, 2014, p. 182). The majority of the indirect financial support is provided by the Ministry of Science and Education, “in forms of subsidised tuition fees, accommodation, meals, health insurance, transportation and tax reliefs” (the Strategy, 2014, p. 182). Student Centres (owned by higher education institutions) are the ones responsible for the provision of these forms of student support. Prices for student

accommodation are determined by the Student Centres and may vary between universities and regions (the Strategy, 2014, p. 183) Ministry of Science and Education also gives financial support for students in private accommodation, which is awarded through a public call for students with lower socioeconomic status, but who do not get the place in student dormitories. In addition, meals for the full-time students in student restaurants and transport costs are largely subsidised. Considering all these measures to tackle financial challenges, it seems that Croatian higher education is on the way to diminish those challenges, which would ensure easier access to higher education for refugees but for other vulnerable groups. Moreover, to address the affordability marker, the National Plan devotes Objective 5 to the improvement of the student financial support system for members of vulnerable groups, including refugees (2018, p. 16).

Therefore, according to the Strategy (2014, p. 181), “Investing in student financial support and in the social dimension of higher education is closely related to one of the main strategic objectives of higher education: making it accessible to all. The ‘social dimension’ relates to the Ministerial Communiqués mentioned earlier in this thesis, aligning Croatian higher education with the Bologna Process and EHEA. Strategical objective 6 (The Strategy, 2014 p. 181) aims at improving financial support for students, with a special emphasis on the social dimension of higher education. This is the first mention of the social dimension of higher education throughout the document, and it tackles financial challenges as the biggest obstacle in refugees’ access to higher education. The Strategy (2014, p. 181) mentions that the social dimension will be further discussed and tackled in the upcoming documents, and National Plan is one of those documents.

Croatian higher education does not charge tuition fees for Croatian students, however, even in this context, expenses for housing, food, transportation, and books are still there. The Strategy mentions the need for the new national system of financial support, which should be based on direct support, with the grants as the main support instrument. Those grants should be available to all students (including part-time students), based on the criteria of student needs (such as socioeconomic status and other criteria applying to vulnerable groups, including refugees). Ministry of Science and Education (MSE) increased the amount of financial support for students in 2017. According to the MSE state-funded scholarships are granted to an average of 5 400 students per academic year. This, nevertheless, accounts for 4,5% of the total student population. In addition, around 11 500 students apply for these scholarships every year, and 10 000 of them meet the criteria. These numbers indicate that there is a need for further increase of state scholarships for students, especially for vulnerable students, including refugees, as

those students are potentially most at risk of dropping out of their studies. Croatia should introduce scholarships for foreign students (the Strategy, 2014, p. 190), nevertheless, it is not clear whether it refers to refugee's student as their status as an international or domestic student is ambiguous.

Furthermore, a study conducted within the EU-funded project ACCESS showed that accommodation costs represent the highest costs for students; this also shows that there is a big difference in costs for students living in dormitories and those living in private accommodation (for example rented apartments). Therefore, Strategy (2014, p. 186) aims to develop and implement the plan for the renovation of the existing accommodation capacities and build new ones. Furthermore, according to the Report on the implementation of measures from the Action plan for the Integration of Beneficiaries of International Protection (2017-2019), measure 10.2. and 10.3. specifically, focus on higher education. Measure 10.2 (p. 30) aims at ensuring student accommodation and state scholarship under the conditions that apply to Croatia citizens, and it has been partly implemented, with only one refugee student being granted student accommodation.

#### **4.6 Final remarks**

From the available and analysed documents, plans, conference conclusions, there is a lack of awareness about how different the needs of refugees are. As Unangst (2019, p. 158) states, refugees in higher education represent an urgent concern for higher education institutions and for governmental policy, as “university graduates will be key actors in the rebuilding of conflict states worldwide”. Without access to higher education, refugees are at risk of social exclusion from different aspects. First, not knowing the language prevents communication and thus integration with the wider community. Second, without the openness of the education system to refugees, it will be very difficult to recognise their qualifications and competencies. Third, without adequate education, their access to the labour market is limited, and therefore refugees cannot achieve the necessary conditions for independent life (Tecilazic Gorsic 2017, p. 445).

Reaching equity in education has been one of the primary goals of contemporary educational policies. However, although European countries reached universal participation in primary and secondary education, it is still a pertinent issue to reach in higher education. Moreover, the availability of higher education also motivates younger refugees for completing primary and secondary education, showing the importance of the connection between educational levels (Pherali & Moghli, 2019, p. 4). Nevertheless, increasing the number of students in higher

education will not contribute to achieving social equity, but it will contribute to an increase of graduates mismatching the labour market (Zgaga, 2015, p. 15). In addition, when refugee graduates are denied access to the labour market due to their legal status, higher education can reproduce frustration and false hope (Pherali & Moghli, 2019, p. 5). Therefore, educational expansion does not mean less educational inequality, but it preserves the probabilities relative to their social class or increase social inequality. (Puzic, et al., 2006, p. 246; Doolan et al., 2018, p. 475).

Furthermore, Haaristo, Orr and Little (2012, p. 2) proposed a typology of social inclusiveness of European higher education systems using Eurostudent. Based on this typology, the socially exclusive higher education system is the one that has a high level of overrepresentation of students from better-educated backgrounds while there is a low level of presentation of students from the less-educated background. Based on this, Croatian higher education is socially exclusive (Haaristo et al., 2012, p. 2; Doolan et al., 2018, p. 471). Although different societal and educational changes occurred during the last decades, general findings on social inequalities in accessing higher education are similar to the ones from the 1960s (Doolan et al., 2018, p. 469). Therefore, although the current efforts seem to be going in the right direction, they are insufficient and inadequate. According to Streitwieser and co-authors (2020, p. 16), the starting point for policymakers and institutions should be to increase awareness among universities, public institutions, and general society about the needs of refugees and challenges they are facing when trying to access higher education and to integrate to the society overall. This could be done by sharing information and advocating for the rights of refugees to access higher education.

Education policies aiming to decreased social inequalities in access to higher education have been primarily focused on financial challenges and financially compensating disadvantaged students through different scholarship schemes, lower accommodation costs, food prices and transport costs (Doolan et al., 2018, p. 477). Although financial challenges are significant challenges that need to be tackled with series of measures and actions, according to Zgaga (2015, p. 16), access to higher education for individuals from vulnerable groups is primarily a consequence of unequal social and cultural capital and only then a consequence of lacking finances. This emphasis on financial challenges can be observed in the analysed data in this thesis as well. According to the National Plan, many instruments are planned to help vulnerable students get the necessary money. There are also instruments developed for helping students



compensating for their lack of social and cultural capital, however, those need to be further developed.

## 5 ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

*“The higher participation in higher education we achieve – more equitable our societies are.  
Is it so simple?”*

(Zgaga, 2015, p. 5)

Following the discussion, in this chapter, I will describe additional considerations regarding this thesis. This will be done by reviewing the thesis, its trustworthiness and reliability, implications, connection to Sustainable Development Goals, and recommendations for further research.

### 5.1 Thesis review

According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 94), thematic analysis is relatively easy to apply to qualitative data, even in the early stage of one’s research career. However, it is important to remember that thematic analysis is not simply a collection of data extract put together without analytic narrative, and it is neither a selection of data extracts with comments that paraphrase their content (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 94). A potential pitfall of thematic analysis is weak analysis with the themes that do not work, overlapping themes, and themes that are not consistent and coherent. As Braun and Clarke (2006 p. 94) state, “All aspects of the theme should cohere around a central idea or concept.” I used thematic analysis to organise and analyse two official higher education policy documents into systematic frames using the 4A Framework.

The trustworthiness and validity of this research are addressed through my analysis of the data, peer review and feedback, and self-reflexivity. In order to gain credibility, I repeatedly and thoroughly read the main data set used for analysis in order to reach conclusions and answers to the research question. Moreover, the research question was changing during the process of conducting this research as the data analysis informed the development of the research question. In the paragraph about the researcher's position, I reflect and acknowledge my role in this process. In the data analysis chapter, I presented how I undertook data analysis step by step with a justification of how and why those steps were carried out. An important limitation of this thesis is the fact that I am a novice researcher, making mistakes and reflecting on potential pitfalls while conducting my first research. This aspect was crucial for me to keep in mind while doing data analysis, especially in cases where I identified overlapping among themes and had to make decisions about the data to avoid recurrence of themes. This also shows my role as a

researcher and the influence my decisions and reflections regarding the data had on the findings of this thesis.

Furthermore, after careful reading and preliminary research about higher education policy in Croatia, the main data set was chosen after careful reading and preliminary research about higher education policy. During this step, I decided to focus on the two official higher education policy documents adopted by the Government of the Republic of Croatia and not on policy documents specific to certain Universities as I wanted to look at the broader picture and develop a wider understanding of the topic. Nevertheless, policies specific to each University or University of Applied Sciences would also give valuable information regarding the inclusiveness of higher education for refugees. The two analysed policy documents are available both in English and Croatian, and I used both language versions in order to ensure their consistency. In addition, studies, previous research, reports, legislative and policy documents used for literature review were consulted in English and in the Croatian language, in cases where both language versions were available, to confirm my interpretation and lead me to reach strong, credible, and justifiable conclusions and understanding.

Coming back to the questions guiding self-reflexivity (Tracy, 2010, p 851), mentioned in Chapter 1, *was I ready for this?* The answer to the question changed with the development of this thesis, just as the thesis writing and research questions changed and developed while doing the data analysis, interpreting findings, and reaching the conclusions. While conducting the analysis, I reflected on this question a lot – am I really ready for this? But then again, how can I, as a novice researcher, be ready for conducting research while still learning how to do it? Learning by doing and learning by failing is one of the most valuable ways of learning. Conducting this research is an ongoing learning process for me; it questioned my assumptions, biases, and the sense of the importance of this topic. It surely expanded my understanding of the topic and made me realise how much more there is to learn, research, and understand.

Furthermore, the reliability of qualitative research is often criticised, as the researchers and their assumptions are a part of qualitative research, it is not realistic to expect that two different researchers will apply the same perspective to the chosen data set (Vaismoradi, et al, 2013, p. 403). In the context of this research, the reliability of the research is established by using a pre-existing coding framework and themes developed by Katarina Tomaševski (2001) and adopted by Maxwell and Granlund (2011). The 4A Framework, or in this case 5A Framework, is a useful tool for understanding and explaining the right to education. However, it cannot be used

as a comprehensive, generic guide for every international treaty or policy documents as the markers contained in the 5A Framework are not necessarily standard used in all laws (Right to Education Project, 2008). Nevertheless, it certainly served as a tool and guide for a better and deeper understanding of the right to education in analysed policy documents. The themes are coherent and, I believe, thoroughly analysed, and discussed with the use of different supporting sources and with my own interpretation. I tried to make my voice clear throughout this thesis, and although I did not use the first-person pronouns in all cases, I aimed at keeping my voice clear by linking many authors together and organising their research.

Thematic analysis usually offers findings and results which can be accessible to the general public (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 97). I aimed to write and conduct this research in a way that is accessible to the general audience, not only researchers and students in the same field. I offer many explanations and, at times, lengthy descriptions. I decided to keep those parts of the thesis because I want the thesis to be accessible and of use to the general public, to individuals outside of this field of research and because I wanted this thesis to serve as a guide for me and my future research development.

Moreover, in the scope of this thesis, I did not focus on the role of civil societies, NGOs, and other organisations which have an important role in the integration of refugees into society and into the educational systems. Those aspects are left for future research and future discussion.

Teachers, educational professionals, university lecturers, and professors have a key role in successfully integrating refugees in higher education. In this research, I did not put them in the focus as I was looking at the broader realisation of the right to education. Their role, however, is important and crucial and deserves to have more attention in future research, as well as in the implementation of the National Plan and the Strategy analysed in this thesis. Lastly, I did not include refugees themselves in this research. Although this research aimed to conduct policy analysis and see how the right to higher education is addressed in official policy documents, more research is certainly needed with including refugees as active participants of the research.

## **5.2 The implication of the findings and recommendations for further research**

The implications of the findings of this thesis are intended to enhance understanding of higher education policy provisions of higher education in the Republic of Croatia and the degree to which the chosen policies adequately reflect the analysed five markers of inclusive education. In summary, the findings showed that provisions within the higher education policies of Croatia involve most dimensions of inclusive education. Although there is a good legislative framework

and various Regulations that prescribe different aspects related to the successful integration in higher education, they are not fully in use. The Croatian higher education system does not have a standard policy about the inclusion of refugee students. Moreover, the analysis showed the consistency between the two documents. However, although there have been attempts and adjustments to make higher education more inclusive, the policy gaps are detected in the adaptation of curriculum, the language of instruction as well as in recognition of prior learning, and quality of overall higher education, showing that there is more that has to be done and given attention to. Overall, I do believe this thesis shows significant findings related to the inclusion of refugees in higher education, according to the analysed policy documents, in the specific and interesting context of post-socialist Croatia.

The successful integration of refugees to higher education in Croatia has to be based on the real needs of society and refugees, and not just the mere adoption of practices taken from the EU that are inapplicable to the specific context of Croatia as a post-war country. The higher educational policies should have a strong connection to the local context and local integration, considering the population's socio-political and cultural life and structure.

Furthermore, the relation of this thesis and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be seen in different goals, out of which most relatable is SDG 4, which aims to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all“ (UN, 2015). Specifically, this thesis can relate to target 4.5, which focuses on the issue of equity in all levels of education and ensuring education for vulnerable groups. To my understanding, developing education policies in line with the human rights-based approach is fundamental in the realisation of SDGs. The findings of this research show that there are efforts and commitment on the level of policymakers to ensure inclusive higher education for all, however, more concrete actions need to be done in order to translate those policies into practice, and consequently, reach SDG 4 targets. In addition, “reaching the un-reached will require targeted policies that address discrimination and inequality in all aspects of the education system” (Schaeffer, 2008, p. 89).

The important question rising at this point is how do policies translate into practice? In this thesis, I analysed two official policy documents as main data, with discussion supported with other policy and legal documents and existing literature. Nevertheless, although the policies address all the markers from the 4A framework, it is necessary to check how this is applied in practice. Therefore, further research on this topic would be welcome. Moreover, this thesis does

not take into account the perspective of refugees (or vulnerable groups) themselves. I mentioned the most common challenges and barriers for refugees trying to access higher education, and it is clear that the admission procedure can be long and complicated (Morrice, 2013, p. 653). However, there is still a lack of research on the participation of refugees in higher education, their experience and completion. The refugees' access and participation in higher education deserve the interest of the scientific research community. In addition, including refugees as important contributors in the design, planning, and implementation of higher education programmes is crucial for ensuring relevance, ownership, and sustainability of higher education (Pherali & Moghli, 2019, p. 13). Therefore, further research with refugees as the main actors would be needed, and it may also stimulate wider discussion about the mentioned issue and contribute to the formation of policies and politics. Moreover, among the identified vulnerable groups, I focused on refugees as a broad group. However, there are certainly even more vulnerable groups among this vulnerable group, such as refugee women. Further research on vulnerable groups among vulnerable groups is therefore necessary in order to reach inclusive higher education for all.

Furthermore, as mentioned before, according to Zgaga (2015, p. 16), access, participation and completion of higher education are related to the social and cultural capital of an individual. Therefore, I would recommend additional research and exploration on Bourdieu's notion of habitus and theory of Social and Cultural capital in the context of higher education for refugees in Croatia, as this thesis does not reflect on Bourdieu's theory.

It is also important to remember that higher education can also reproduce existing social inequalities, repress minority languages and cultures, and exclude vulnerable students and refugees from accessing quality higher education (Pherali & Moghli, 2019, p. 4). Zgaga (2015, p. 15) poses the question, "Higher participation in higher education we achieve – more equitable our societies are. Is it so simple?" The simple answer Zgaga gives would be no, higher education alone does not make societies more equitable. As Zgaga (2015, p. 15) states, "education is not a powerful magic wand – even in the 'knowledge economies' it is not." Nevertheless, educational systems should use their role in society in creating equal opportunities in education for all. This is something that still needs to be discussed and further researched. Lastly, the National Plan itself and the impact on higher education and society, in general, should be followed up once the implementation will be done, which will be by the end of 2021.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This thesis looked at how the right to higher education for refugees is constructed in two official higher education policy documents in the Republic of Croatia, Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (2014) and National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia 2019 – 2021 (2018). The findings of this research suggest that provisions within the higher education policies of Croatia involve most dimensions of inclusive education. Although there is a good legislative framework and various Regulations that prescribe different aspects related to the successful integration in higher education, they are not fully in use. Moreover, while there was some discussion about the flexible and individualised treatment of refugees in terms of entrance exams (as explained in the discussion chapter using Rectors' conference), the situation still remains unchanged, therefore, change is needed. In addition, a well-designed and inclusive system of education increases the possibility of employment and therefore decreases dependency on social benefits.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that in order for higher education to be fully inclusive and in line with the five markers used of analysis, intensive language courses should be available for refugee students and adapted to their learning needs. Framework for recognition of prior learning and its corresponding Law should be updated in order to ensure appropriate procedures and enable refugees to access higher education and further learning paths.

According to Doolan and co-authors (2018, p. 473), mass expansion of higher education systems in Central and Eastern European socialist countries enabled more disadvantaged and vulnerable students to participate in higher education. Nevertheless, this did not change their access probabilities. In order for educational processes to be successful, the basic needs of an individual (housing, social care and health care) must be met. Analysed policy documents show that there are efforts, concrete measures and objectives planned to make higher education more inclusive, however, it is still to be seen and researched how those efforts are translated into practice. Moreover, from the analysed policy documents, conference conclusions, plans and reports it can be noticed that there is a lack of awareness about how different the needs of refugees are.

By including refugees in the community's daily life in which they reside, the community itself gains maximum benefit. For integration to be successful, it is necessary to enable refugees to reach their full potential as members of society and contribute to the community. To achieve the above, it is necessary to create a legal framework that creates a stimulating environment by

preventing discrimination and xenophobia and promoting intercultural dialogue. This requires a comprehensive approach from the educational system, governmental institution, NGOs as well as local authorities.

An inclusive society creates a mutually supportive community. This approach requires overcoming the minority-majority perception of society. This means that promoting the well-being of refugees is not something else or contrary to promoting the well-being of all members of society. Integration is a matter of greater harmony and coexistence (CPS, 2012, p. 13). Furthermore, if there is a lack of social justice and social cohesion, there is a risk of marginalisation of refugees, their under-representation and the climate of mutual mistrust and tensions (CPS, 2012, p. 13). Higher education should have an important role in the discussion about sustainable solutions to the refugee crisis (Pherali & Moghli, 2019, p. 3). Lastly, “every refugee is a person who has been labelled that way because of circumstances that were largely beyond their control” (Streitwieser et al., 2020, p. 16), and that is why it is all of us as members of society need to stop putting labels and stereotypes on refugees and aim at creating opportunities and chances which can be beneficial for the whole society.



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