

Providing policy-makers and practitioners with resources to improve
the social dimension of the European Higher Education Area



PL4SD

peer learning for the
social dimension

Final Report

Croatia

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Contact us for further information

Institute of Advanced Studies (IHS)
Stumpergasse 56, 1060 Vienna, Austria
Email address: info@pl4sd.eu
Phone number: +43 1 599 91 133

This report has been written by Dominic Orr and Melinda Szabo in collaboration with the Country Review Experts and members of the PL4SD Consortium mentioned on page 8 of this report.

The Project Consortium



Austria:
Institute for Advanced
Studies Vienna (IHS; coordinator)

Martin Unger
Petra Wejwar
Sarah Zaussinger



Croatia:
Institute for the Development of
Education (IDE)

Thomas Farnell
Ninoslav Šćukanec



Germany:
German Centre for Research on Higher
Education and Science Studies (DZHW)

Dominic Orr
Melinda Szabo



Belgium:
European Students' Union (ESU)

Elisabeth Gehrke
Tiago Estêvão
Martins

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Glossary

Abbreviation	
BFUG	Bologna Follow-Up Group
IDIZ	Institute for Social Research in Zagreb
DZHW	German Centre for Research on Higher Education and Science Studies
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ECTS	European Credit, Transfer and Accumulation System
HEI(s)	Higher Education Institution(s)
IDE	Institute for the Development of Education
IHS	Institute for Advanced Studies
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education ¹
MZOS	Ministry of Science, Education and Sports
NCVVO	National Centre for the External Evaluation of Education
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PL4SD	Peer Learning for Social Dimension

¹ <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-standard-classification-of-education.aspx>

1 Introduction

The current report presents the analysis and the findings resulting from the national review that was carried out in Croatia in the second half of 2014 as part of the Peer Learning for Social Dimension Project (PL4SD).

Croatia was one of the three countries that opted to participate in the initial series of the PL4SD Country Reviews. The participation of the country has been endorsed by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports (MZOS) in Croatia and has been confirmed by the project Stakeholders' Forum, formed by the members of the BFUG Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning Working Group (2012-2015).

The review was jointly coordinated by the Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS) based in Vienna, Austria as leader of the PL4SD project and one of the project partners, the German Centre for Research on Higher Education and Science Studies (DZHW) based in Hanover, Germany.

The PL4SD Country Reviews have the aim of providing an external and comprehensive reflection and review of initiatives and measures undertaken by a country to support the social dimension of higher education. The objective of the review is to assist Croatia in the development of a coherent and effective national strategy for improving the social dimension of higher education.

Furthermore, the Review aims to highlight Croatia as a role model, which wishes to look at its education and especially higher education system from the perspective of improving the social dimension of higher education. Both the project participants and the inviting Ministry are convinced that this type of review can lead to overall improvements in access to and delivery of higher education in the 21st century.

1.1 The social dimension of higher education

A combination of three factors tends to determine educational success: student ability, material and non-material (e.g. social and cultural) resources, and opportunity. In particular, non-academic factors such as social background, financial resources, aspiration, flexible provisions of higher education and study framework conditions (e.g. balance between work and studies) affect participation and success in higher education. Additionally, student ability may have been affected by a person's material and immaterial resources at previous (e.g. secondary) educational levels.

Under the term 'social dimension' the Ministers responsible for higher education in the Bologna signatory countries have committed to improving the inclusiveness of European higher education, in recognition that access conditions and study frameworks may have to be better diversified in order to assure opportunity for all members of society. The Country Review follows this Ministerial commitment:

In the **London Communiqué** of May 2007, Ministers responsible for higher education agreed on a common objective for the social dimension: *“that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations”*.

They further emphasised the importance *“of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background”* and of the continuation of 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.”*

Ministers also committed themselves to report on their *“... national strategies and policies for the social dimension, including action plans and measures to evaluate their effectiveness”*.

In **Leuven/Louvain-La-Neuve** (2009), Ministers pledged to *“...set measurable targets to widen participation of underrepresented groups in higher education, to be reached by the end of the next decade.”*

In **Bucharest** (2012), Ministers agreed to *“...develop a system of voluntary peer learning and reviewing by 2013 in countries which request it and initiate a pilot project to promote peer learning on the social dimension of higher education.”*

The commitments undertaken by the Ministers are based on the arguments of social justice (i.e. attaining educational success regardless of a person’s origin) as well as economic (i.e. maximising the talent and potential of individuals and the economy) and societal gains (e.g. increased civic engagement, better health and social cohesion).

1.2 Structure of the Country Review

The PL4SD Consortium developed a framework for the Country Reviews that was detailed in the Terms of Reference and was agreed with the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports (MZOS) in Croatia. The review process consists of a preparation phase of setting up the external review team and drafting of the Background Report, an implementation phase of developing the schedule for the site visit and the on-site review and the final phase of drafting and finalising the review report.

1.2.1 The external review team

The Country Review was conducted by an international review team consisting of four members of the PL4SD Consortium and three external experts who were selected based on their wide-ranging experience in the assessment of national higher education systems and their understanding of social dimension issues. Collectively their knowledge and experience enables them to sympathise with and comprehend the perspectives of policy-makers, HEI representatives, researchers and students. The external experts were nominated by the PL4SD Consortium and mandated by the Stakeholders’ Forum (consisting of members of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning Working Group of the Bologna Process, 2012-2015).

To establish that there was no known conflict of interest the curriculum vitae of experts was made available to the Croatian Ministry prior to the on-site visit.

The external review team was composed of the following experts.

External reviewers	Position and affiliation
John Brennan	Professor of Higher Education Research at the Open University and Visiting Professor at the University of Bath, the London School of Economics and Political Science and London Metropolitan University (United Kingdom)
Liz Thomas	Professor of Higher Education, Faculty of Education Edge Hill University. Visiting Professor, Academic Development Unit, Staffordshire University (United Kingdom)
Vanja Ivošević	Research Assistant and Marie Curie Doctoral Fellow at the University of Porto (Portugal) and former Chairperson of the European Students' Union (formerly ESIB)
Martin Unger	Project Leader, PL4SD Senior Researcher, Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS, Austria)
Dominic Orr	Country Review Coordinator, PL4SD Senior Researcher, Centre for Research on Higher Education and Science Studies (DZHW, Germany)
Petra Wejwar	PL4SD Consortium Researcher, Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS, Austria)
Melinda Szabo	Country Review, PL4SD Expert, Centre for Research on Higher Education and Science Studies (DZHW, Germany)

1.2.2 Background Report

The Background Report was developed two months prior to the site visit. The report was based on a predefined template following a series of guiding questions. A number of supporting documents were collected from the Bologna National reporting exercise, studies carried out by Eurydice, EUROSTUDENT, Eurostat, the Eurypedia database as well as other materials provided by the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports and the Institute for the Development of Education (IDE). In addition, the information provided by Croatia to the PL4SD database on measures for improving the social dimension of higher education was also included in the report.

The Background Report was sent for further consultation to the Croatian contact persons and used to prepare the on-site visit and the Final Review report. An updated and elaborated version of this Background Report is provided in Annex 2 to this report.

1.2.3 Site visit

The site visit took place between 29 September and 3 October 2014. The Croatian contact persons assisted the review team with the logistics and coordination of the site visit. An outline of the site visit schedule was developed by the review team and finalised by the national contact person (see Annex 1).

During the five-day visit, the review team interviewed approximately 60 individuals, separately or in groups. Discussions were held with officials from the Ministry of Science, Education and Sport (directorate for education, departments for the development of higher education, department for higher education operations and student support, department for student standards etc.), with students and representatives from the Croatian student council (CSC) and student councils of the colleges of applied sciences, with representatives of the rectors conference and the Council of Universities and Colleges of Applied Sciences (VVIVŠ), with the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE), with the Central Application Office (CAO), the National Centre for the External Evaluation of Education (NCVVO), researchers (IDIZ), non-governmental organisations (IDE), the Association for the promotion of quality education of young people with disabilities “Zamisli” and the Croatian Employment Service-Central office. The review team has also met with the Zagreb School of Economics and Management and conducted interviews ‘on location’ at University of Zagreb, University of Rijeka and Karlovac University College of Applied Sciences.

The review team would like to thank the contact persons for their support in organising the site visit and for facilitating the research and documentation process. The review team is also grateful to the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports (MZOS) for its hospitality and openness and to everyone who participated and provided the reviewers with helpful insights into the social dimension issues of the Croatian higher education.

1.2.4 Structure and purpose of the Final Report

The Final Report draws together the analysis in the Background Report (Annex 2) and the review team’s observations during the on-site visit.

The Background Report covers the main features of the Croatian education system (national context, general organisational framework and mechanisms and some central statistics). In order to grasp the issues that can affect the accessibility and fairness of the higher education system in Croatia at various stages of the education system, the Background Report is structured into four sections: before entry to higher education, at entry, study framework and graduation and progression. This structure is repeated in the Final Report. The reviewers have considered both academic and non-academic factors that can affect the learning opportunities and success of students, particularly those from underrepresented groups.

For each of these four stages, the report details the main findings, highlighting what the reviewers have learnt about the Croatian higher education system. It then provides an analysis of these findings with a reflection on possible future action. The main aim of this

report is not to recommend particular actions, but to facilitate Croatia in its efforts to see the whole picture concerning the social dimension and to use this insight to create a national strategy or action plan with policy measures for improving the social dimension of higher education. To this aim the report closes with key recommendations arising from the four preceding chapters.

2 Analysis and main findings

As a preamble, there are a number of contextual facts, which should be borne in mind, when considering an analysis of the social dimension in Croatia. These are noted below.

Reform dynamic

Within the framework of the Bologna Process, the Croatian higher education has implemented a series of higher education reforms that have laid the ground for improvements in the areas of transparency, governance and steering of the system. The social dimension of higher education has increasingly become a central policy concern in these reforms. Croatia's newly adopted Strategy for Education, Science and Technology has, among its main aims, the creation of a society of equal opportunities and has designed objectives and measures to address for instance students' financial support. The Croatian Qualifications Framework Act adopted in 2013 includes social equality and equity as part of its main principles and objectives. As part of the National Implementation Plan for Social Inclusion 2009-2010 a number of targets and objectives have been set up for expanding social services, facilitating access to housing for socially vulnerable groups, promoting gender equality in prevention of poverty and social exclusion pertaining to the different levels of education. At the level of implementation, the new "programme contracts" developed following the amendment to the Law on Science and Higher Education in 2013 have required HEIs to prioritise the social dimension in their activities and have provided access to additional funding streams to support this.

Before initiating these reforms Croatia has improved its data collection, gathering relevant data on the social and economic conditions of student life (as part of the international EUROSTUDENT surveys), examining factors influencing access, retention and completion of higher education or student financial support (Tempus project ACCESS²: Towards Equitable and Transparent Access to Higher Education in Croatia, 2010-2013) and defining minimum standards of accessibility for students with disabilities (EduQuality project³ - Education for Equal Opportunities at Croatian Universities).

The regionalisation and stratification of the higher education sector

Although data has been gathered in a broader manner and policy-makers can use them further in designing policies, Croatia is still facing a number of challenges related to its steering capacity in a complex higher education sector. Croatia has a binary system differentiating between universities and universities and colleges of applied sciences. Over 70% of all students in Croatia are concentrated in the largest public universities in Croatia (Rijeka, Zagreb, Osijek and Split) with a little over 50% of all students enrolled at the University of Zagreb alone. This makes the University of Zagreb and the city of Zagreb major players in any developments in Croatian higher education policy and practice. In a

² <http://www.tempus-access.info/english/>

³ www.eduquality-hr.com

positive sense, they can become leading actors in improving the social dimension of higher education in Croatia, but seen negatively, they could also become major inhibitors.

Those who study at universities and colleges of applied sciences or schools of professional higher education make up roughly 20% of the student population. These students are more likely to come from a rural area and are more likely to study part-time (48-45% for 2012/13) compared to those in the university sector (21% for 2012/13) (Burušić et al., 2012)⁴. This means that these HEIs are already playing an important role in making higher education participation in Croatia more inclusive and flexible.

Strengthening the social dimension of higher education needs to take into account the contextual factors presented above. In this context the review team note the reforms undertaken by Croatia and further encourage the development of a coherent national approach to social dimension that would ensure the continuation of initiated reforms. These developments should address the fragmentation of the system (in terms of regionalisation and stratification) to enhance its steering capacity.

The review team further address the specific issues of the social dimension related to access, transition between different levels of education, progress into and successful completion of higher education below.

2.1 Before entry to higher education

2.1.1 Characteristics of this stage

This stage can generally be characterised as a qualifying and decision-making stage for students. The pre-tertiary level of the education system presents certain routes through the system that will facilitate entry to higher education to prospective students. At the same time, completion of a lower level of education will lead to exiting this level and therefore entails a decision on the part of the learner as to whether they want to, aspire to or can enter higher education. This is likely to be taken on the basis of their expected exit qualifications, the expected costs and benefits of entering higher education and the alternatives available. An important characteristic is also the type of education a student is currently following, as it might determine the opportunities and chances for entering higher education (e.g. different opportunities for graduates of general schools and vocational schools). In many cases, research has shown that students from underrepresented groups are more pessimistic about the options regarding participating in higher education. For this reason, one of the main goals for improving the equality of opportunities and the inclusivity of higher education is to make special efforts to prepare prospective students beforehand, providing them with information about the available options and raising their aspirations (Moore et al., 2013, p. 15).

⁴ This topic is treated in more depth in the Background Report, Section 3.3.1.

2.1.2 What we have learnt

Croatia has the highest number of young people completing secondary education in Europe, with over 95% of the population aged 20-24 having completed an upper level⁵ of secondary qualification (Svarc & Račić, 2014, p. 38). In addition about two-thirds of the youth population aged 18 have enrolled into higher education. These high participation numbers mean that selection and decision-making are less dependent on simply the exit qualifications and more dependent on qualitative differences between pupils' learning paths and their individual scores.

The organisation of the school system means that young people have to make decisions at the age of 14-15 years (at the start of general or vocational school) on which type of school and where they want to continue their education. This decision is particularly important since it determines the opportunities for studying and for following certain study programmes at the end of their schooling.

Pupils of four-year secondary education (from general and vocational schools) have a direct route to the State Matura (leaving certificate) and subsequent entry to higher education. However, pupils completing a three-year vocational school (22.5% of secondary school age group in 2012) or having a lower level of secondary education do not have this opportunity. They have to acquire a higher qualification (exam or continuing their secondary level studies) before they are eligible for entry into higher education⁶. Only about 4% of three-year vocational school graduates enter higher education through this alternative route.

Socio-economic background

There is a strong relationship between the performance of students and the socio-economic status of schools. An analysis of differences in achievement of fourth and eighth grade pupils from primary school shows that schools situated in urban areas are on average more successful than rural schools (Burušić et al., 2012, p. 17). The difference is more accentuated when considering the difference in performance according to the level of socio-economic development. Schools situated in areas that are below the national average according to their level of socio-economic development are also below the national average in their academic achievement. The spatial and socio-economic characteristics of specific regions and municipalities influence access to higher education, with the lowest access rates found in regions classified as rural and/or socio-economically underdeveloped (Bilić, 2012, p. 68.).

Teacher quality across schools is also reflected in terms of differences in student-teacher ratio and the level of teacher education. In general the share of qualified teachers in socio-economically advantaged schools is much higher than the proportion of qualified teachers in disadvantaged schools (OECD, PISA 2012 Database, Table II.4.6. p. 125). Additionally

⁵ Upper level is understood here as the last years of secondary schooling.

⁶ See Background Report Section 3.1

the differences in disciplinary profiles between advantaged and disadvantaged schools are particularly marked within the country and leads to an uneven access to further levels of education⁷.

University students with highly-educated parents are far better represented in higher education.⁸ They are more likely to attend *gymnasia* (70%) and are about six times more likely to enter higher education compared to children with a lower socio-economic status. In contrast students whose parents have lower levels of education are more likely to attend vocational secondary schools (80%) and less likely to progress into higher education. Of those who apply for higher education, they are most likely to enrol in professional higher education studies (63%).⁹

Gender imbalances

Croatian girls outperform boys in reading tests, while boys outscore girls in mathematics.¹⁰ These differences between boys and girls are more accentuated in problem-solving performances, in favour of boys. The gender imbalance is further reflected in the distribution of the school population in secondary tracks. Almost two-thirds of those enrolled in the general education track (*gymnasia*) are female, while vocational schools are more frequently attended by males (with the exception of art schools, where the vast majority of students are female).¹¹ Since *gymnasia* are the direct route to a university programme, this disproportionality is also reflected in the gender balance in the two different sectors (university and non-university sectors).

False binary system

The review team note, however, that Croatia has made special efforts to enable pupils from both general education and vocational tracks to enter higher education (e.g. curriculum reforms, introduction of the State Matura exam). Nevertheless, the review team heard from national researchers that a consequence of this reform to secondary schooling is increased higher education participation rate from both tracks, which calls into question the remaining “false binary system” between the two school paths. Especially for the four year vocational schools, about which the review team heard that almost all of pupils in this track enter higher education and do not seek immediate work in the labour market. From this perspective, vocational training may be too narrowly focussed to prepare pupils well for entering higher education and the curriculum is too restrictive.

2.1.3 Analysis and reflections

In discussions the review team noted a concern about the equitable distribution of good quality schooling throughout the country. There is a need to address these early inequities in the system in particular finding a way to balance the differences in educational

⁷ See Background Report, Section 3.1.

⁸ Unpublished EUROSTUDENT V data set.

⁹ See Background Report, Section 1.3.

¹⁰ See Background Report, Section 3.1.

¹¹ See Background Report section 3.1 Table 1.

achievement between schools in wealthier and poorer areas, which result to some extent from the local financing of schools. Disadvantaged schools need to cope with less financial resources and have more difficulties in attracting qualified teachers. Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds who live in socio-economically underdeveloped regions face the double liability of lacking social and economic support at home and attending a school with lower-quality teaching resources. Targeted financial support for schools with low academic standards, as well as targeted, specifically designed in-service teacher training programmes and pre-service teacher education modules would help improve the equitable access to further levels of education.

Addressing gender inequalities early on in the educational track could ensure a more balanced participation of women and men across different subjects and foster a more proportionate representation in their entry into the labour market. In this respect there is a need to identify factors that create – and widen – the gender gap in education and foster incentives to narrow this gap through quantitative and qualitative research. Building on such research findings particular in-service teacher training programmes could be developed and mainstreamed into pre-service teacher education to address the gender inequalities in learning outcomes.

Opening up access to higher education for those following a vocational track, especially those enrolled in a short study programme, is a positive structural development that should be further promoted. This development needs to be taken into account when designing the vocational education and training school curricula, which is undergoing a reform. The newly developed curricula should ensure a good basis for those wishing to enter higher education. Although the possibility to organise remedial instruction for the State Mature is stipulated within the law (Article 33 of the Primary and Secondary Education Act), to mediate the persisting disadvantages of these students, additional academic and financial support may be needed to prepare them to pass the State Matura exam.

2.2 At entry to higher education

2.2.1 Characteristics of this stage

This stage is characterised as the selection stage of the higher education system. The entrance stage should ideally provide equal access opportunities to all prospective students. However, in most countries participation and representation rates of different societal groups are uneven, in particular when referring to groups from low-socio-economic backgrounds, students with disabilities or when it comes to the choices of study fields for women and men. For this reason, the social dimension goal is to widen access, especially for these groups.

In order to understand this stage and its impacts it is therefore important to look at the general entry requirements for all groups of students. Alternative and second chance routes are of particular interest as well, as these routes include remedial support to help

prospective students including mature learners, who have not followed the typical path to higher education entry.

2.2.2 What we have learnt

During the site visit the review team learned that the state graduation exam (State Matura) is organized and conducted by the National Center for External Evaluation of Education in collaboration with schools and other public institutions involved in the implementation of the exam in five different centres across Croatia. Each school has a coordinator of the test where students can turn to for all questions regarding the method of approaching and passing the state graduation exam¹². Experts learned from the Central Application Office that compulsory state graduation exams can be taken at the higher level (A) and elementary level (B). Students who pass the basic (B) level exams cannot access higher education study programs that require the higher level (A) of examinations. The conditions of entry are set by the individual HEIs. In some cases HEIs have additional entry examinations. The review team heard that sometimes these additional examinations are linked to the results achieved by students in study fields during their secondary years.

Students with special needs follow special examination procedures customized to the type of disability or impairment (extended duration of testing, large print, oral instead of written exams etc.). All higher education institutions are expected to provide candidates with severe disabilities (60% or higher) the right to priority admission. Although the experts learned of the special provisions in admission practices offered at the University of Zagreb and Rijeka, they could not assess the extent to which these priority admission practices are successfully implemented in all higher education institutions across Croatia.

The state graduation exam (Matura) can be taken for free by graduates of general secondary education track (*gymnasia*), four-year vocational high-school and art school students. However, other candidates (e.g. adult learners) are required to pay an examination fee (± 22 EUR). To enrol into a Croatian HEI, candidates have to pass the exams; the review team noted that at the last State Matura examination, 97.5% of candidates successfully passed the mandatory state exams. For older applicants, who cannot have passed the State Matura because it was not in existence as they completed their schooling, special conditions apply.

Data provided to the review team by the Central Application Office from the academic year 2010/2011 indicate that half the number of students who 12 years before entered the first grade continued their studies directly into higher education. The largest share of applicants comes from the four-year general education track. Almost all students who enrol in a four-year high school programme (both general and vocational education) sign up for the State Matura exam. The review team heard that the study programmes that are running in Zagreb are usually the most attractive, especially among top students. Regular academic programmes and university study programmes organized and carried out in public

¹² See Background Report, Section 3.2.

universities have also a higher level of desirability. Professional study programmes, although less desirable overall, enrol nearly two-thirds of those who have completed vocational secondary education (Jokic & Ristic Dedic, 2014).

The review team was informed that expensive fields such as STEM, ICT fields, health do not attract as many students as other study options (compared to EU 28 levels)¹³ due to the higher cost of studies, but also to a smaller share of places available in these study fields (as compared to the field of social sciences).

The data provided to the review team by the Central Application Office show that the total number of candidates over the past years has grown, despite the relative stability of the number of applicants who in the year of entry into higher education completed secondary education. The main reason for this growth is the increasing enrolment of other age cohorts who enrol in larger numbers in part-time courses. The part-time study format is meant to enable mature students and persons holding employment to access higher education. They have a higher chance to enter this type of programme, since the necessary grade point average is often lower than for full-time programmes.¹⁴

Looking at the representation rates of different societal groups, the review team notes that students coming from family backgrounds with lower levels of education are more likely to have a delayed transition into higher education compared to their peers and they are also more likely to enrol in higher numbers in professional studies.¹⁵ Similarly, Croatia has in general a small share of mature learners (25-65 year old) who enrol into higher education (2.6%) and most of them (75%) choose part-time study in professional programmes. Although Croatia has set to widen the participation of mature learners (25-65 year old), the share is currently rather low compared to the EU 28 average (of 10.7%).¹⁶

The team learned from the Institute for Social Research and the Institute for the Development of Education (both based in Zagreb) about studies addressing access to higher education (e.g. Social identities, higher education access and course choice, Equality: Linking quality and social inclusion in higher education in Croatia, Secondary school pupils' civic competence, prejudice and discrimination experiences.)¹⁷ The research overview presented provides an initial insight into the education system and could serve as evidence for policy-making. However, the review team learned from the discussion with researchers from the Institute for Social Research that there remains a lack of a formal tracking across the education system (primary, secondary, tertiary) and relatively limited information regarding the social diversity of the student population across the sectors (e.g. vocational vs. academic track, private institutions) and levels of higher education (e.g. primary, secondary, tertiary).

2.2.3 Analysis and reflections

¹³ See Background Report, Section 3.3.2.

¹⁴ see Background Report, Section 3.2.

¹⁵ Unpublished EUROSTUDENT V data set.

¹⁶ See Background Report, Section 3.3.6.

¹⁷ <http://www.idi.hr/en/projekti/>

The discussions during the site visit highlighted the fact that the introduction of an online system for central admissions has facilitated the application and enrolment into HEIs. The system has also improved transparency, fairness and objectivity of higher education entry and admission processes.

Differences in the intentions and geographical mobility of candidates reflect the differences in the secondary level education (performance of vocational vs. general schools, as discussed above) the socio-economic background of candidates and to some extent, the geographic location. This may be an indication of a problematic interrelation between quality of education provisions, ability of candidates and considerations of affordability on the part of the prospective students. This general/vocational division of pathways at the secondary level has the effect of limiting opportunities for progression to higher education for some groups of students and there can be a social dimension to these groupings. It might be useful to consider other or more flexible pathways into higher education.

There is a need to gain more insight into the equal access opportunities to all prospective students wherever they are based in Croatia. In this sense it would be useful to design a tracking system that would follow progress routes of secondary school graduates and their study choice (i.e. information into what and where students choose to study related to social factors). Future analytical work – such as the studies conducted by Burušić et al. (2012), Bilić (2012) and the Institute for Social Research – would be highly encouraged by the review team. Evidence from such tracking may point to the need for additional interventions to improve participation between geographical areas and socio-economic groups.

Older generations (> 24 years) who have not passed the State Matura currently have a second chance to access higher education, if HEIs have set up special quotas for this group. The review team considered it important for HEI to retain such second chance routes into the future as they provide an important opportunity for widening higher education entry for mature students who are less well-represented. In this respect the Croatian Qualifications Framework could also be used to support the provision of new access routes through its processes of validation and recognition of non-formal learning.

2.3 Study frameworks

2.3.1 Characteristics of this stage

This stage is characterised by the progression towards the successful completion of studies within the higher education system. A central goal for the social dimension must be to ensure the retention and learning progression of all students regardless of their social and economic background. This ultimately means on one hand providing student support services such as academic support and development and careers guidance, and enabling a certain flexibility of study progress, and on the other hand ensuring direct support in the form of student grants and in-direct financial support for students to achieve this objective. These are therefore important aspects, which the review team looked at during the review.

2.3.2 What we have learnt

In terms of ensuring equitable support to those enrolled in higher education a number of issues have been considered.

In terms of financial allocation for higher education, Croatia spends 0.9% of its GDP compared to the EU average of 1.27%. The public expenditure on financial student support in Croatia is also considered among the lowest in EU countries. Of the total higher education expenditure, 12% is allocated to student support (direct and indirect), a sector which has been largely unreformed since the 1990s.¹⁸

Direct financial support

The review team was informed that student grants are provided by HEIs (colleges, faculties, universities etc.), national or local government (ministries, counties/provinces, cities etc.), foundations, non-governmental organizations, private companies or private donors. During the site visit, the team learned that students (and prospective students) are informed of various scholarships available to them via a ‘Higher Education and Scholarships Fair’ organised every year by the Institute for the Development of Education (IDE). The Fair offers presentation of study programmes, financial aid options and other educational programmes and services available to Croatian citizens in Croatia and abroad. In addition, students can access scholarships, from over 302 awarding institutions via an online platform set up by the EU-funded project ‘VIRTUS – Virtual Academic Information Service: Scholarships.info’.¹⁹

The review team notes that although there is data on student support collected centrally, this does not cover all available funding streams (e.g. support provided by local governments, or other private bodies) and thus do not provide a complete picture of the effectiveness of the student support system²⁰. The EUROSTUDENT data set however shows that more than a quarter of students receive some form of a grant and only about 6% of full-time students are awarded a state scholarship (2013/2014). However, the data set also shows that this public support (in a broad sense) only accounts for one-fifth of recipients’ monthly income.²¹ This means that it only makes a relatively small contribution to student costs in any case. Moreover, from the site visit discussion, the review team learned that state scholarships, which come directly from MZOS, are predominantly based on merit and less on needs or on combined merit- and needs-based criteria.

In general the scholarships reach students who do not pay tuition fees, with 40% of them receiving some form of financial aid, as opposed to 21% of full-time fee-paying students.²² As grants are considered generally low, to support themselves during studies Croatian (full-

¹⁸ See Background Report Section 1.2 and Section 3.2.2.

¹⁹ www.scholarships.info

²⁰ See Background Report, Section 3.2.2.

²¹ Unpublished EUROSTUDENT V data set.

²² Unpublished EUROSTUDENT V data set.

time) students rely to a large extent (76%) on family or partner contribution with only 8% of them having self-earned income²³ (see Doolan, Dolenc and Domazed 2012, p. 20).

During a discussion with the Ministry, the review team was made aware that due to logistical concerns state scholarships are provided from January to September and not at the start of the academic year. This is because the grant amount is fixed and so the amount which each applicant receives is based on the total number of eligible applicants there are. The review team discussed with the ministerial representatives, whether it would be possible to simplify this procedure in order to provide scholarships to the students earlier. The current situation is likely to impact particularly negatively on students from low-income families who would require financial support at the start of their academic year. One idea discussed was to fix the grant amount and the eligibility criteria before publication of the call. This would make the procedure simpler, but it might mean that the total amount spend on scholarships varies from year to year slightly.

Indirect financial support

As shown in the Background Report²⁴ *meal subsidies* form the highest amount of the indirect funding (78%), which is allocated to all full-time students in public HEIs and are administered by the Student Centers). The review team learned that the meals system has recently been reformed by MZOS. The student cafeterias have had a 2.5% decrease in funding and the subsidies for all other non-student-menu offers by cafeterias were decreased by 50% (e.g. coffee, juice, tea, cakes etc.). These changes led to savings, which were then used to re-allocate public funding away from indirect support to direct support of students in the form of the state scholarships. This re-direction was welcomed by the review team.

Student accommodation is supported by the Ministry in the form of places at student halls of residence or in the form of direct subsidy for private accommodation.²⁵ Part-time students, students studying at private HEIs are not eligible for subsidised accommodation. Croatia's 13 residence halls house 11% of the student population meeting approximately two-thirds of demands (Farnell et al, 2012.). The review team learned during the site visit that students residing in private accommodation can compete for a limited number of funds to cover a small part of accommodation costs (approx. EUR 30). The selection criterion is based on a combination of both merit (based on ECTS credits) and social criteria (no parents, divorced parents, both parents unemployed, children of war veterans, students with special needs, student parents). Since dormitories are the most affordable accommodation option, HEIs in areas with no student dormitories have difficulties attracting students from outside their region (e.g. University of Dubrovnik does not have a student dormitories and private accommodation tends to be tourism-oriented and expensive) (Doolan, Dolenc and Domazed 2012, p. 43.). The review team noted that the Ministry and HEIs recognise the lack of student housing capacity and in this respect investments have been sought for the development and modernisation of university campuses.

²³ Data refer to students not living at home with their parents

²⁴ See Background Report, Section 3.2.2.

²⁵ See Background Report, Section 3.2.2.

Students with disabilities (an impairment rating of 50% or more) are automatically granted a place in the student dormitory²⁶. During the site visit the team learned that some student dormitories have been adapted to meet the needs of students with disabilities. For instance the Student Center in Zagreb has a total of 31 wheelchair accessible rooms and 6 other rooms, which are accessible to other students with mobility impairments. The University of Zagreb provides funding for assistants of students with disabilities that live in the student dormitory.

Transportation costs are (partially) covered by local governments of towns and cities, in which the HEI is located. The extent to which these transportation subsidies take into account the socio-economic background of students, or students with mobility impairment is not monitored or analysed at central level, thus it's not possible to assess the level of adequate support for local transportation. The review team heard that transportation costs present nevertheless a challenge for commuters, who report higher living expenses per semester than those who live in the city.

Study costs

The cost of studies is considered generally high in comparison to other EU countries. The average total costs of studies in Croatia would amount to EUR 4,200 per year, of which the indirect costs represent EUR 3,450 per year²⁷. Although only about a half of the share of part-time students are de facto employed, they are required to pay the full amount of these fees. Part-time students also report higher study related costs and higher living expenses (food, transportation).

All undergraduate and graduate full-time students are exempted from paying fees for the first year of study. After their first year, full-time students may continue to study free of charge if they have accumulated the required number of ECTS credits in the previous year (55 credits, while 60 credits are determined as the full annual workload). Students who do not meet this requirement are charged tuition fees according to a linear model: the amount of fees is variable and increases proportionally with the number of missing ECTS.²⁸ Overall, government covered the full tuition fees for 38% of students for the academic year 2012/2013, while 61% of students covered fully or partially the amount of tuition fees.²⁹

In general, students enrolled in professional studies pay tuition fees more often than students enrolled in university studies, have higher costs related to their living expenses and significantly lower chances of receiving a grant than students of university studies³⁰. This is partially explained by the fact that half of all students enrolled in professional studies have the status of part-time students, thus paying full tuition costs, while universities have only about 15% part-time students (Farnell et. al/EUROSTUDENT, 2011, p. 7). Part-time students also tend to assess their workload significantly higher and their financial situation as being worse than other students, thus being at higher risk of drop-out (Farnell et.

²⁶ See MZOS Website: <http://public.mzos.hr/Default.aspx?art=8934&sec=2259>

²⁷ EUROSTUDENT Survey, 2010.

²⁸ See Background Report, Section 3.2.1.

²⁹ See Background Report, Section 3.2.1.

³⁰ See Background report, Section 3.2.1.

al/EUROSTUDENT, 2011, p. 79). This is an important finding, since this type of HEI is also more likely to enrol non-traditional students from lower social economic backgrounds. In this case, this is certainly a challenge for the improving the social dimension of higher education participation for this group in this type of HEI.

Study progress and success

The review team learned during the site visit that students coming from a vocational track are struggling to meet the academic requirements and are more likely to end up paying tuition fees as they could not achieve the required ECTS points (via the linear system) or drop out of HE.

Overall a large share of the student population combines work with their study (43% of students work and 21% of them are employed full-time). Students who work during the semester tend to come from families of lower socio-economic status³¹. As the intensity of work alongside studying may affect students' academic success, from the social dimension perspective it is important to look at the organisation of studies and timetables. Experts were told in the discussion with HEIs that flexible study provision is ensured in this respect for part-time students following an agreement contained in the programme contracts with the Ministry. However, students who are not registered as part-time (working temporary or a limited number of hours per week) do not benefit from this provision.

The review team noted that students with disabilities can ask for study adjustments or individual planning of their studies to accommodate for their different teaching and learning needs. Although different types of provisions are in place, the review team were told that additional support (e.g. accessible learning materials or information) is needed to ensure the progression of students with disability during their studies. This is also shown in the EUROSTUDENT data, where 68% of students with disabilities report that their impairments were “insufficiently taken into account” or “not taken into account at all” during their studies.

The review team also learned of the results of a project to support students with disabilities (EduQuality Project)³², by providing training for university staff, developing educational handbooks with practical guidelines for HEIs to work with students with disabilities etc.

Students with a lower socio-economic status are generally exposed to greater financial difficulties than other students. As a result they seek temporary or full-time work to support their studies and living costs, which does not necessarily match their career orientation. This is indicated by their tendency to be less satisfied with their financial status compared to students who do not work during their studies (Farnell et al., 2012, p. 34). Other categories of students who estimate their socio-economic status as low are mature students, students with children (largely enrolled in professional studies), those coming from family backgrounds with lower levels of education and those living in student halls (Farnell et al., 2011, p. 7-8). The dependence of tuition fee exemption on students'

³¹ Unpublished EUROSTUDENT V data set.

³² www.eduquality-hr.com

performances may disproportionately favour students from more privileged backgrounds, as students from low-income groups would have a higher workload, combining part-time working hours with study hours.

Contract-based funding of HEIs

The review team learned of the newly introduced pilot-scheme of programme contracts, which allows public HEIs to receive additional funding for meeting certain targets within the three-year term period of the agreement (from the academic year 2012/2013 to 2014/2015). Performance-based funding represent 10% of the total amount that each HEI receives as tuition fee subsidies and include two performance indicators (out of five) directly related to the social dimension (fostering access of under-represented groups and of mature students, drop-out rates).

Since the HEIs are largely autonomous, the internal allocation of this funding is determined by the institutions themselves. The institutional strength of the faculties, which are the real centres of all HEI activities, means that a large part of this funding is transferred directly to them. The team was informed that about 15% of the programme contracts remain at University/Rectorate level while 85% are directed to the Faculties in the case of University of Zagreb and University of Rijeka.

Although the amount reserved for activities related to the social dimension is small the review team noted a few initiatives that have been effectively developed at the University of Zagreb (workshops on learning difficulties, psychological and career counselling services, support for students with disabilities, scholarships for students with low socio-economic status and students with disabilities, including students with specific learning disabilities etc.) and University of Rijeka (development of psychological counselling services, supporting the office for disabled students, projects related to gender issues, reaching out activities to secondary school students).

The University of Zagreb set up five strategic goals on the basis of the contract-based funding, of which two are directly connected to aspects of social dimension (i.e. providing support for disadvantage groups of students and shortening time needed for graduation). This allowed the university to set up two centres for students' support and counselling and for teacher excellence). Furthermore the team was pleased to learn about the institutional strategy developed by the University of Rijeka, where 85% of the Rectorate funding is reserved for the four main strategic goals established by the university, of which one of them directly addresses the social dimension within the institution.

2.3.3 Analysis and reflections

Direct and indirect support of students

The Croatian student financial support is heavily concentrated on indirect support (subsidised meals, student accommodation, transport etc.) rather than direct support to students. The review team welcome the recent reduction in the indirect support allocated

to food subsidies, which occurred recently, whereby the saved money was re-directed to provide more state scholarships to underrepresented groups.

Similarly, the Croatian student support system has been based on the merit criteria or a combination of needs and merit criteria. However, due to a small number of available scholarships merit criteria prevailed even when combined with needs criteria.³³ The rationale behind the system set up is the criterion of excellence — often presented as an objective criterion, which enables a fair dissemination of the total available study places and state funded places to students, as well as the grants and loans. This view is rarely challenged in the academic community, or even the society. (Vukasović et al., 2009, p. 55; Geven, 2012, p. 19)

Recently steps were made to design the system of student scholarships around the needs criteria. The experts welcome this development. As the current distribution of state scholarships (according to the number of scholarships reserved for each category of students) does not take into account the specific financial needs of students sufficiently, the Ministry could consider setting threshold criteria for state grants. In this system all students whose parents earn a combined sum of less than X and who are registered as active-full-time students can receive a scholarship. This may mean that the number of recipients would be different each year (higher or lower) but would, however, be more transparent for applicants. Simplifying the system in this way would also facilitate the allocation of grants at the start of the semester instead of late in the semester as is current practice.

Overall, the current student financial support landscape is characterised by its complexity and fragmentation. This leads to a lack of transparency in the system, which is disadvantageous to both students and to policy-makers.³⁴ In the first instance, the lack of transparency means that students can hardly know all the support options available to them – and how much they will receive, or whether they will be receiving any funding. In the second instance, the lack of transparency and the lack of central data on overall student support make the system difficult to steer or use for policy interventions. To ensure more transparency in public funding, the social support system should be revised in terms of data collection and information to provide better guidance for students (and their parents) and more targeted policy development (i.e. on the cumulative amounts students receive through the fragmented scholarship and support funds).

Although support services at central university level (counselling, support for disabled students etc.) have a coherent approach in addressing locally students' financial and study needs, their activity could become better integrated at faculty level. The instruments of external and internal quality assurance and the programme contracts could be used more

³³ Response from the Ministry (verbatim): *We wouldn't fully agree that merit criteria prevails. Due to the reforms of the Ministry, from 2013 the scholarships are awarded based on the social status of the student (income of the family). As for the National Foundation for the Support of Pupil and Student's Standard, it awards the scholarships based on the various categories: students with disabilities, Roma students, students without parental care, student athletes).*

³⁴ Response from the Ministry (verbatim): *We wouldn't fully agree that the system isn't transparent. The Ministry of Science, Education and Sports has made the reform of the system in the area of student support (scholarships) and contributed to the control of the system. All the results are published on the web (this refers to the Ministry and the National Foundation for the Support of Pupil and Student's Standard). Also, for the state scholarships, the Ministry sets up the Commission that controls the whole process (representatives of the Commission are, among others, the student representatives as well).*

effectively in addressing this situation (i.e. the programme contract funds kept at University/Rectorate level for such internal steering – could be increased). The need for this integration was effectively demonstrated in the project E-quality: Linking quality and social inclusion in higher education in Croatia project, led by IDE.

Ensuring students' learning progress

In addition to financial support, disadvantaged and vulnerable students require a supportive learning environment. Although limited information is available on the drop-out rates and characteristics of the student body, the review team learned from the discussion with researchers that one of the main reasons for non-completion of studies is the difficulty in reconciling work and study priorities (timetabling difficulties), financial barriers, poor channels of information and marginalisation from the full-time student body. Policy-makers should consider the levers available to them in order to set appropriate sanctions and incentives.

To improve the retention of students with different learning needs, more attention should be paid to supporting the quality of teaching and learning, and integrated learning support. The review team suggests a stronger focus on developing academic support services especially in the transition phase from school to higher education and in particular for students with vocational background entering university (e.g. learning workshops, better introduction to subjects in the first year with teachers focusing more on what they expect and how to prepare for lessons and exams, buddy support systems, student learning groups and spaces, additional time in the first year for subjects). First year students are expected to need more time to go through the same “amount” of reading and subject matter at the start of their studies, thus the curriculum design, teaching practices and ECTS credit allocation should be adapted in this regard.

Furthermore to ensure a good retention and learning progress of the student body it is essential to support the preparation of the academic staff. In this sense, the review team recommends developing quality teaching practices (i.e. teaching focused on the needs of diverse students and students who are at risk of dropping out), introduction of criteria for academic career advancement (based on the quality of teaching practices), awareness raising through academic conferences on university teaching pedagogy and university centres for training academic staff, etc.

At present part-time status remains largely a category for those students paying full-tuition fees, although only half of them are in full-time employment. Part-time learners are important for inclusion and lifelong learning (including re-training), but they are frequently vulnerable in terms of study progression and completion. The review team welcome the fact that flexibility of studies has become a requirement for the accreditation of part-time studies and would like to emphasise that more work is likely to be required in this area for full-time students.

Tuition fees and contract funding as funding instruments

Waiving fees for all full-time students in their first year of studies is welcomed by the review team. Also the linear model, which accompanies this system and only requires students to pay for ECTS they have not achieved, is a transparent system and appears well-accepted. Seen positively, it actually allows students, who are formally studying full-time, to reduce the intensity of their studies if necessary, without losing this status completely.

Seen in a more negative light, the linear model may be disfavoured students who are struggling to progress through their studies. One additional problem, which was mentioned at one of the HEIs visited, is that the linear model can provide a certain incentive for HEIs to maintain a relatively large share of students who do not achieve the required ECTS. This is because these students will be contributing to additional income for the HEI in question as they pay privately for a part of their studies based on their missing ECTS.

Certainly, further analysis is needed to grasp the effects on different student categories (mature students, students with children, part-time students, students with disabilities, low income students etc.) in order to properly evaluate the effects of this system.

In the context of actually supporting students, more direct interventions such as programme contracts are an important tool. The piloted programme contracts, which are linked to the development of university strategies, are an effective way for institutions to achieve certain policy objectives and an important mechanism to foster the social dimension. The amount of funding is however limited and it can be only accessed by public HEIs. The review team recommends evaluating the current pilot with a view to maintaining and perhaps increasing the value of this contract funding.

2.4 Graduation and transition

2.4.1 Characteristics of this stage

The graduation and transition stage is characterised as the move into the labour market or further educational training. Successfully offering a more inclusive higher education system necessitates consideration of what happens after completion of a course of study.

2.4.2 What we have learnt

Transition to labour market

The high unemployment and low labour market participation have led to a deterioration of the social situation in Croatia, in particular for young people as their unemployment increased drastically and reached almost 50% in 2013. The review team was pleased to learn during the site visit of some initiatives taken by the Croatian Employment Service (CES) in addressing this issue. Also Croatia has adopted a Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan in 2014 to further address this issue.

The experts learned that special emphasis has been put on lifelong career guidance, lifelong learning, counselling and empowerment of the youth and on development of the CES

services aimed at youth. CES implemented measures directed towards young people under the age of 30. These measures are aimed at boosting the competences and preparation of young people for inclusion in the labour market and entrepreneurship as well as to the development of the civil society³⁵.

Most of the existing preventive and intervention measures were extended in the past two years including capacity building for the establishment of new services and measures, such as the Lifelong Career Guidance Centres (CISOKs).³⁶ The CISOK model for lifelong career guidance was introduced in 2013 in order to deliver quality tailor-made services for lifelong career guidance to all citizens, especially young people (pupils and students) and other target groups of clients which are not traditional clients registered in Croatian Employment Service (including those not in education, employment, or training (NEETs) etc.). The experts learned that eleven CISOKs have been established already within 10 regions in Croatia, which will be further extended to a number of other regions in the following years.

2.4.3 Analysis and reflections

The review team considers that the Youth Guarantee Scheme represents an effective tool to reduce the chances of prolonged inactivity rates and loss of skills of recent graduates and further welcomes the expansion of the Youth Guarantee to the 15-29 age group in accordance with the country's youth policy framework. It also welcomes the CISOK model for lifelong career guidance.

The study of labour market needs is an important mechanism to inform (prospective) students, HEIs but also policy-makers in order to address the mismatches of educational providers and employment offers. It is nevertheless important for employers themselves to be more involved in the higher education sector, to understand the potentials of higher education graduates and inform them of possible career developments.

In terms of higher education's role in increasing the employability of graduates, the review team would like to encourage the development of activities at programme and institutional level that would increase the interaction between HEI and business and therefore the early integration of prospective graduates into the labour market e.g. work-based learning, career guidance, a direct engagement with employers, provision of internships, graduate business start-up schemes etc.

The review team further suggests the possibility of introducing a career tracking system that could monitor student progression throughout the education system and beyond (i.e. from vocational track to university of applied sciences and to vocational job) for consideration. This should have a particular focus on the transition of vulnerable groups (such as those from low socio-economic backgrounds) to other levels of education and employment.

³⁵ See Background Report Section 3.4

³⁶ http://euroguidancezagreb2014.com/docs/HR_Kacunic.pdf

The review team would finally like to emphasize that the role of higher education is not summed up as in preparation for 'entry' to the labour market but for a lifetime movement through it.

2.5 General comments

The social dimension has become a clear strategic goal for both national policy and institutional strategies in Croatia. The review team considers the initiated projects at national (e.g. programme contracts) or institutional level (e.g. establishment of centres for special support and services of students) as highly beneficial to addressing the social dimension of higher education.

However, these reforms are occurring in difficult circumstances. Croatia needs to ensure the allocation of sufficient funding to the key issues in order to implement its new National Education and Research Strategy over the coming years. However, despite the increase in public funding for higher education compared to 2008 (as a percentage of GDP), there has been a contraction in public funding of Croatian HEIs of around 5-10% over the last five years). The data collected by the EUA' Public Funding Observatory (2014) shows that public financing of higher education has reached a new low in 2014. This creates a particular problem for the social dimension as it means that any initiatives must either be funded from external sources (e.g. by means of European funded projects) or by taking the funding away from other areas.

This means that a stronger evidence-base for initiatives related to the social dimension will be necessary. The review team note from their discussions on location that many of the current reforms were supported by research and the use of monitoring and evidence in their inception. For instance, the ACCESS project that provided policy guidelines for the development of higher education funding reform, including the reform of the student financial support system. However, once these reforms have become a more settled part of the system, follow-up research on impact will be necessary – both at policy-level, but especially at the level of HEI.

3 Considerations and recommendations

The review team has formulated a number of recommendations below based on the reflection of interviews carried out during the site visit and the background analysis carried out prior to the visit. The objective is to call to the attention of stakeholders in Croatian higher education the areas, which should be critically reviewed in order to improve the social dimension of higher education and thereby the overall performance of the system.

Short term:

Short-term recommendations concern areas in which no major system change is necessary, but general, concerted action can already lead to improvements.

1. A more unified system of data collection in a fragmented system.

A joined-up approach for integrating the social dimension of higher education more visibly into the Croatian education system has already been initiated with the national strategy. However, horizontal reform is always difficult and is likely to be particularly challenging in the strongly differentiated higher education system in Croatia.

The fragmentation of the direct support of students, for instance, is a result of both policy and the division of responsibilities and budgets within the higher education system. Students might receive grants or other forms of support from their HEIs, the city they study in, the city they come from, from businesses or from scholarship programmes. The review team heard that over 300 potential funders of students come together at the annual fare. Whilst it would be beneficial to simplify the system, it should be a priority to regularly collect and critically analyse data on the type and amount of support students are receiving through this decentralised system and to what extent the funding takes account of the social dimension. Such funding is an important steering mechanism for supporting policy priorities such as, for instance, underrepresented groups.

More information is also required on which parts of the higher education system are really supporting the social dimension of higher education. The review team has the impression that much of the support happens within HEIs, but at central, Rectorate level, whilst (particularly for the large universities) the faculties, which are the centre of responsibility for students' teaching and learning (and surely their welfare), differ in the extent of their engagement. Again, more systematic information on the division of responsibilities in these important areas could help stimulate discussions on how a more joined-up approach might be possible.

2. Frequent (small-scale) research to support evidence-based policy.

Whilst large-scale projects and research programmes are able to lead to the formulation of broad strategies and ways of working, smaller scale, more in-depth studies might be able to uncover whether the intended effects are really occurring or unintended effects emerge. This is already happening to some extent and the review team encourages more such work of this type. Two examples for further study are: (i) the programme contracts, which the review team supports in principle, but research should be done on how the five performance indicators (including two social dimension related ones) are actually implemented and how they impact across the system and (ii) the lineal tuition fee model, which provides a certain (limited) flexibility of studying for students. The latter allows them in principal to remain on free or discounted study places even if they reduce their study intensity for a short period. It also contains an incentive for HEIs to at least accept students not achieving their envisaged credits, since this leads to a small amount of additional income for the HEI. Both instruments contain assumptions about their effects, which should be studied in order to lead to improvements.

3. Consolidate efforts to improve student support through encouraging different societal actors and direct stakeholders to work together.

Making good support services accessible to all students irrespective of their study location and faculty would be an improvement, as these are currently only offered to students of certain HEIs or certain faculties. This often happens due to lack of resources on the part of HEIs or their faculties, lack of motivation and lack of professionalization. Peer learning between HEIs and faculties should be sought and has been implemented in some cases already. If the issues were unrelated to resources, peer learning would be sufficient. However, the scarcity of resources suggests the development of partnerships of provision between professional HEIs and university centres, at least in the same cities to deliver activities such as e.g. induction weeks for all students focused on how to learn, differences between higher education and secondary education, how to write papers for seminars, how to prepare lab reports, student counselling, disability support etc. Due to their central position in Croatian higher education in terms of size and resources, the large public universities in Croatia (Rijeka, Zagreb, Osijek and Split) have a key role to play here.

4. Greater direct financial support through state scholarship.

The recent reduction in indirect support to afford a greater direct financial support through the state scholarship is highly welcomed. The next necessary key change (which could be a short-term goal) should be the earlier payment of the state scholarship to students and better clarity of exact criteria. This problem can be resolved through a review of the administrative procedures and will, at least improve the transparency and certainty for applicants.

Medium term:

Medium-term recommendations concern areas in which system change can be initiated after the short-term recommendations have been implemented.

4. Recognize and further support the key role which universities of applied science and regional HEIs play for the social dimension.

As in most developed countries, higher education in Croatia is a differentiated system. There are different kinds of HEI, with different statuses and reputations, located in different parts of the country. In achieving improvements in the social dimension, it is important to recognise differences between institutions. Whilst one in five students are enrolled in universities and colleges of applied sciences or schools of professional higher education, these students are more likely to come from a rural area, low socio-economic background and are more likely to study part-time. This means that these HEIs are already playing an important role in making higher education participation in Croatia more inclusive and flexible. Their vocational and regional focus also makes these HEIs particularly important for the local economy and labour markets. This should be built on. The piloted programme contracts are an effective way to foster the social dimension at institutional level. The review team recommends maintaining this initiative and increasing the value of the funding allocated through this steering instrument.

5. Review the State Matura examination and its impacts.

The introduction of the Matura provides formal equality, in that everyone is treated the same, and this has led to its high level of acceptance in Croatia by all stakeholders. However, further consideration needs to be given to the barriers to access, including the contribution of educational pathway (school) and family socio-economic background to qualification results. Taking into account potential, rather than past performance, is challenging but without steps to address this issue progress is necessarily limited. The special treatment of older people in the population, who could not have taken the recently introduced Matura, can be seen as a possible way forward towards establishing a general second chance or alternative route into higher education.

6. Build on the reform of student support from indirect to direct support.

Student financial support is crucial (EU Press release, 2014). A key concern in the Croatian context is the lack of transparency and the lack of certainty of financial support, which is likely to have an especially negative impact on students from low-income families – but it is probably ineffective as a steering instrument for all student groups anyway. There are two factors contributing to this: first is that the information about financial support is dispersed and each award has to be applied for separately. Consideration should be given to greater co-ordination, with the aspiration for a single application process. Secondly, many of the

awards are linked to merit-based, rather than or in addition to need-based criteria. This has advantages, but may also have disadvantages for students who experience adverse circumstances and/or who need financial security. Additionally, even for those who do receive support, it only makes up a small share of their total income (average one-fifth). It would therefore be prudent to explore the advantages, limitations and alternative models of providing student financial support. In this context the prevailing attitude that merit is objective criteria should be questioned more openly. The review team encouraged MZOS to further develop the system based on needs by looking at other models of needs based systems and to further evaluate instruments of student support which seem to be low and with unclear effects.

7. Review the effects of the quality of pre-tertiary education on young people's opportunities to attend and thrive in tertiary education (university and universities of applied science).

Inequities in earlier levels of education lead to an uneven access to higher education. Differences in educational achievement between schools in wealthier and poorer areas of Croatia have been shown to affect pupils' access to higher education. Similarly, the representation of females in the general education track (two-thirds of women in general education vs. one-third males) is further reflected in the gender imbalance in the two different higher education sectors (university and non-university sectors) and academic fields of study. The review team encourages: efforts to tackle the differences in opportunities and chances for prospective students to achieve their full potential by entering higher education (e.g. different opportunities for graduates of general schools and vocational schools) especially for all identified underrepresented groups; investment in good quality schooling throughout the country; and encourages equal representation of both genders (e.g. keep track of gender statistics; raise awareness of gender equality issues among staff and students; encourage more women to pursue scientific and technical studies etc.). Targeted financial support for schools with low academic standards, as well as targeted, specifically designed in-service teacher training programmes and adapted pre-service education, would help improve the equitable access to further levels of education.

Long term:

Work towards a system change regarding the place of the social dimension in Croatian higher education

8. Seeing the social dimension as an important evaluative framework for the overall performance of Croatian higher education.

The current focus for improving the social dimension in higher education is on direct and indirect student support, rather than on institutional change and inclusion. There are also differences in the recognition of problems according to whether stakeholders believe that the social dimension is about 'equalities of opportunities' or about 'equalities of outcomes.' In both cases, the focus on students and not the system and on provision of opportunities

instead of on how people can and do take advantage of these entails the disadvantage of missing the point in two important ways. Firstly, formal equality of opportunities may not translate into actual equal opportunities, as people's circumstances affect their chances of taking these opportunities (e.g. financial obstacles, information obstacles and indeed obstacles related to the quality of previous education). Secondly, focussing more on outcomes may bring to light a higher diversity of resulting outcomes than can be explained by inequality of opportunities. Instead, this diversity may have more to do with the overall quality of opportunities. Focussing on issues such as the organisation of higher education delivery, pedagogy and assessment, integrated student development and support and outcomes beyond higher education may indeed lead to improvements in the overall quality and performance of the Croatian higher education, rather than only for underrepresented groups. This is why the review team argue that the social dimension is a useful evaluative framework for improving the quality and performance of higher education in general.

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4 Annex 1 – Schedule of on-site visits, 29 September – 3 October 2014

Day / Time	Description of activities	Place	Agenda & Participants
Monday 29 September	Meetings and discussions on broad issues in social dimension from a national perspective (30-60 minutes each)	Zagreb Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, Donje Svetice 38 Meeting room (IV. Floor)	9:00 – 10:00
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ružica Beljo Lučić- Assistant Minister for Higher Education • Ana Tecilazić-Goršić – Head of Sector for Development of Higher Education • Luka Juroš- Head of Sector for Higher Education Operations and Student Support
			10:00 – 11:00 Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE)
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jasmina Havranek, Director • Sandra Bezjak, Assistant director • Emita Blagdan, Assistant director
			11:10 – 12:00
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Željka Nenadić Tabak, Ministry, Head of Department for Student Standard
			12:00 – 13:00 Lunch break
			13:00 – 13:50
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nikola Aleksandar Mališ– The Croatian Student Council of Universities and University Colleges of Applied Sciences 			
14:00 – 15:00			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blaženka Divjak, Vice-rector for students and study programmes (University of Zagreb) 			
15:15 – 16:15			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Žarko Nožica, representative of Council of Universities and University Colleges of Applied Sciences 			

			16:15 – 17:00 “PL4SD internal session”
Tuesday, 30 September	<p>Site visit: University in Zagreb</p> <p>The PL4SD team will be addressing issues regarding the diversity and representation of the student body in that region (e.g. also ethnic mix), smaller HEIs may have less support structures (but they may be better known), working alongside studies to finance studies, etc.</p>	University of Zagreb	<p>9:00 – 11:00</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blaženka Divjak, Vice-rector for students and study programmes; • Lelia Kiš-Glavaš, Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, president of the Commission for students with disabilities of the University of Zagreb; • Marina Ajduković, Faculty of Law, Study centre of social work; • Deniza Drusany, Head of Student Counselling and Support Centre; • Valentina Novak Žižić, social worker, Expert advisor in the Office for students with disabilities
		University of Zagreb Student residents hall Cvjetno	<p>11:30 – 12:30</p> <p>Interview with a student living in the student residents hall and the student providing support for students with disabilities</p>
			<p>12:30 – 14:00</p> <p>Lunch break and return to the Ministry</p>
		Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, Meeting room (IV. Floor)	<p>14:00 – 15:30 Representatives of Zagreb school of economics and management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zoran Barac, Director • Javier Aguayo, Director of International Office • Jelena Janković, Head of Career center
			<p>15:30 – 17:00</p> <p>“PL4SD internal session”</p>
		<p>17:00- 17:45</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vedran Bukvić, representative of National union of students 	

<p>Wednesday 1 October</p>	<p>Site visits: Rijeka & Karlovac</p> <p>The PL4SD team will be addressing regional issues, e.g. diversity and representation of the student body in that region, smaller HEIs may have less support structures (but they may be better known), working alongside studies to finance studies, etc.</p>	<p>Rijeka</p>	<p>8:00 – 10:00 Trip to Rijeka</p>
			<p>10:30 – 12:30 University of Rijeka</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Snježana Prijić Samaržija -Vice-rector for students and study programmes <p>Other possible attendees recommended by the international coordination team:</p> <p>HEI(s):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representatives of a university/college (rector, vice-rector, students, counselling office etc.); • Institution’s financing departments/councils; • Special student groups, e.g. scholarship recipients, people from under-represented groups; <p>Regional stakeholder groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional labour market office; • Regional development office/regional council; • Representative from a Secondary School (director, spokesperson, teachers); <p>Representatives of interest groups from underrepresented groups;</p>
		<p>Karlovac</p>	<p>14:00 – 15:30 Trip to Karlovac</p>
			<p>15:30 – 17:30 Polytechnic of Karlovac</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Branko Wasserbauer, Dean
			<p>17:00 – 18:00 Trip to Zagreb</p>
			<p>9:00 – 10:15</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Igor Drvodelić, Head of the Central Application Office;

<p>Thursday 2 October</p>	<p>Meetings with</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations, stakeholders, researchers working on access routes to HE (outreach, normal routes, alternative routes, special programmes/initiatives, advice and counselling, what makes an application successful); • Representative of a counselling system on transition to HE (where does a “potential student” go for advice?); 	<p>Zagreb</p> <p>Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, Meeting room (IV. Floor)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maja Jukić, Director of the National Centre for External Evaluation of Education; • Katarina Grgec, Head of Service for Department of secondary schools and dormitories; Kristina Begonja, senior advisor, Representatives from the Directorate for Education (Ministry)
			<p>10:30 – 11:30</p> <p>Croatian employment service-central office,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Katarina Ćurković, Head of Division for lifelong career guidance, Central office • Mateja Tolj, expert advisor, Lifelong Career Guidance Centre (CISOK) preparation
			<p>11:30 – 13:00 Lunch break</p>
			<p>13:00 – 14:00</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institute for the Development of Education (IDE) -Thomas Farnel
			<p>14:15 – 15:15</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Svjetlana Marijon, president of the Association for the promotion of quality education of young people with disabilities “Zamisli”
			<p>15:15-16:15 The Institute for Social Research in Zagreb,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boris Jokić, • Zrinka Ristić Dedić,

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mladen Domazet
			16:15 – 17:30
			“PL4SD internal session”
Friday 3 October	First half day: Open session to meet stakeholders who couldn't reach the review team during the week.	Zagreb Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, Meeting room (IV. Floor)	9:00 – 10:00
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Davor Babić, Director of the National Foundation for the Support of Pupil and Student's Standard; possibly with a student/or the students scholarship recipients
			10:15 – 11.15
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Karin Doolan University of Zadar
	11.15– 12:00		
			“PL4SD internal session”
			12:00 – 13:00 Lunch break
	Second half day: Closing the site visit with an oral presentation and discussion of the major issues with the national policy-makers involved in the review		13:30 – 15:30
			Second half day: PL4SD review team & Reviewed country with major stakeholders

5 Annex 2 – Background report

[separate document]