LIFELONG LEARNING FOR ALL NETWORK

Educational inequality in Croatia:
Challenges and needs from the perspective of education system stakeholders

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LIFELONG LEARNING FOR ALL NETWORK

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INTRODUCTION

According to Eurostat data, only 57% of four-year-olds in Croatia attend early and pre-school education, compared to 82% in the European Union. PISA data, on the other hand, indicate that performance of secondary school students is linked to their socioeconomic status, gender and geographical area. According to Eurostat (2019), Croatia also has a low share of highly educated people (Croatia: 33.1%; EU-28: 40.3%) and very low participation of adults in lifelong learning (Croatia: 3.5%; EU-28 : 10.8%). These statistics point to the existence of a number of challenges and barriers that result in certain groups of children, young people and adults having fewer opportunities to access, participate in and complete their education.

Although these educational inequalities are reflected in different parts of the education system, they are closely linked. In November 2020, Ministers of Education from 48 countries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) stated in a joint statement that eliminating social inequalities in higher education requires a lifelong approach:

> *"**The inclusiveness of the entire education system should be improved by developing coherent policies from early childhood education, through schooling to higher education and throughout lifelong learning.** It is important to create synergies with all education levels and related policy areas (such as finance, employment, health and social welfare, housing, migration etc.) in order to develop policy measures that create an inclusive environment throughout the entire education sector that fosters equity, diversity, and inclusion, and is responsive to the needs of the wider community."* (Rome Communication, Annex II, p. 5)

In Croatia, a new network has been launched to examine the problem of educational inequalities in this lifelong and holistic context. The Croatian Lifelong Learning for All Network was launched in October 2020 as a national project co-financed by the European Union through the European Social Fund and coordinated by the Institute for the Development of Education. The aim of the network is to **identify obstacles that lead to educational inequalities in Croatia, from early childhood education and care to higher education, and develop recommendations for removing those obstacles**. The network, which connects researchers and civil society organisations,[1] will carry out research studies on educational inequalities at all levels of education, develop policy recommendations for reducing educational inequalities and hold a structured dialogue with decision-makers and other stakeholders in Croatia on the proposed measures.

The network's first step, before the preparation and implementation of its research studies, was to identify needs in the national and local context. For this purpose, focus groups were conducted with **key stakeholders of the education system in Croatia** to determine the opinions and attitudes of decision-makers, teaching staff, civil society organisations and other experts on the problem of educational inequalities and how they can be mitigated or eliminated. The network established four thematic working groups that prepared and conducted focus groups in the following areas:

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[1] The founding members of the Network are the Institute for the Development of Education, the Academy for Political Development, Forum for Freedom of Education, the Croatian Association for Early Childhood Intervention, the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, Nansen Dialogue Centre, Zagreb Open University, the Association of Croatian Cities the "Step by Step" Parents' Association and Association for the Development of Higher Education "Universitas".

- early and pre-school education and early primary education
- secondary education
- higher education
- adult education.

In accordance with the overall goal of the focus groups, three 'umbrella' research questions were formulated, which each thematic group could adapt to the specific level of education. The core questions were:

- **How do stakeholders in the field of education perceive educational inequalities in Croatia?**
- **What are the current practices of stakeholders and their institutions to reduce educational inequalities?**
- **How do decision-makers / stakeholders in the field of education see opportunities to alleviate / eliminate educational inequalities in Croatia?**

Between April and June 2021, five separate focus groups were held with a total of 33 stakeholders of the education system, including ministries, national agencies, centres and offices, local authorities, educational institutions, professional associations and civil society organisations. Although they are also key stakeholders in education, learners and their families were not included in the focus groups, since the next research studies of the network will focus specifically on the perspectives of these groups, as well as on the perspectives of educational institutions. In this integral report, we present separate chapters for each conducted focus group, as well as a synthesis of the findings of the focus groups at all levels of education.

This integral report is a unique example of a study of educational inequalities in Croatia in a lifelong learning perspective. The focus groups findings will serve the network's thematic groups as a basis for the design of new research studies at each level of education to further shed light on the causes and consequences of educational inequalities, this time from the perspective of learners and educators themselves.

The findings of the focus groups are also particularly significant because they demonstrate the willingness of stakeholders to cooperate in addressing this societal challenge. By participating and contributing to the discussion, stakeholders have confirmed that they recognise the challenges of social inequalities at all levels of education, they have agreed that it is important to take measures to alleviate and eliminate these inequalities, and they have already identified priority areas for implementing such measures.

Accordingly, this integrated report represents the first step in launching a national dialogue on ensuring that lifelong learning truly is 'for all' by increasing the equity and inclusiveness of the entire Croatian education system.

METHODOLOGY

Research participants were selected by using non-random sampling which helped in selecting participants with expert knowledge of educational inequalities at specific levels of education, i.e. key informants were selected for the research. The sample comprised decision makers and other relevant stakeholders in education (more detailed lists can be found in individual reports in Chapter 3). In the first stage, a list of potential participants was compiled, then comments and suggestions were included from other researchers and civil society representatives. A call for research participants was created at the level of the project consortium and adapted to the specific needs of each individual research strand (depending on the examined level of education). The researchers emailed the call to potential participants and/or organisations and some participants and/or organisations were contacted by telephone. Although the participants are active in various capacities in different organisations in education, including public administration and local and regional bodies, in this research they participated as individuals and their input does not necessarily reflect the views of their respective organisations.

Six focus groups were conducted from April to June 2021: one on secondary education, one on adult education, two on pre-school education and early primary education, and two on higher education. Regarding early childhood and pre-school and primary education, one subgroup consisted of representatives of local bodies, public institutions and faculties and the other subgroup were representatives of civil society organisations, head teachers, education experts and teachers. One higher education focus group consisted of previous or current members of the National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education and the other group were other relevant higher education stakeholders.

Once they confirmed their interest to participate in the research, the participants were sent forms to provide their informed consent and recording consent. These forms contained information about the participants' rights before, during and after participating in the research, including refusing to answer any particular questions, withdrawing from the interview and being provided with access to the data and the report. The participants were informed that the data obtained would be used to prepare a research report about the perception of educational inequalities by the key education stakeholders and that no one other than the research group members would have access to audio and video recordings of the focus groups. Personal data and any other data that could potentially reveal the identity of the participant were removed during interview transcription and codes were used to mark the participants' input.

The focus groups were conducted via online platforms Zoom, Google Meet and MS Teams due to COVID-19 and due to the geographic dispersion of the participants. The groups had one (early childhood and pre-school education, primary education, higher education, adult education) or two (secondary education, higher education) moderators and lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. The groups were recorded, with the participants' consent, which enabled later transcription and data analysis. Audio recordings were transcribed and all names in the transcripts were anonymised. Qualitative methods were used to analyse the transcripts – content analysis and qualitative thematic analysis. Once the data was analysed, five research reports were that situated the findings within the theoretical and empirical framework of each level of education.

For detailed information on the research methodology for each level education, see Annex I.

1. EARLY AND PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION AND EARLY PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION

Dejana Bouillet and Sanja Brajković

Education systems have a strong impact on the perpetuation of educational inequalities, which are seen as responsible for unequal life opportunities and the reduced ability of individuals to make use of different social, economic and cultural assets (Felouzis & Charmillot, 2013; Gross, Meyer & Hadjar, 2016; Bloome, Dyer & Zhou, 2018). Educational inequalities can be defined as structural, intentional or non-intentional barriers that lead to unequal access to certain parts of the education system or that lead to different levels of performance within it, due to social background, social conditions and many other factors that are undoubtedly beyond the responsibility of individuals (Müller, 2014). These barriers can lead to exclusion from education, understood as a multi-layered concept that implies physical exclusion of socially vulnerable individuals from education, but also exclusion from meaningful educational processes or insufficient engagement with education (Vandekinderen, Roets, Van Keer & Roose, 2018). The key determinants of educational inequality are considered to be socioeconomic characteristics of the family such as poverty, low level of education, migrant status, etc. (Blömeke, Suhl, Kaiser & Döhrmann, 2012; van Poortvliet, 2021). For example, research confirms that poor children lag behind economically well-off children at all levels of education, are at greater risk of disease and premature death, and are twice as likely to live in poor households when they reach adulthood (Cronin, Argent & Collett, 2018). Educational inequalities are closely related to the notion of social exclusion, which can be prevented at an early and pre-school age. For this reason, education policies are increasingly emphasising that the accessibility of education from the earliest age of a child is a significant mechanism for preventing the social exclusion of children.

This focus group sought to deepen the understanding of educational inequalities in Croatia at the level of early and pre-school and at the level of primary education. The focus group was carried out through a structured dialogue with decision-makers (national and local), educational institutions and users of the education system in order to identify societal needs and public opinions regarding this social phenomenon.

The aim of the focus group was to determine how decision-makers and other relevant stakeholders perceive educational inequalities and the possibilities of alleviating them at the level of early and pre-school education and at the level of primary education.

The final focus group participants were:

- an employee of one ministry
- two university teachers
- two heads of education departments in two different local government units
- an employee of the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children
- two representatives of civil society organisations
- primary school head teacher (representative of a professional association)
- one teacher (representative of a professional association)
- one educator (representative of a professional association).

The focus group participants answered the following groups of questions:

1. Definition of educational inequality

2. Causes of educational inequality

3. Personal contribution to the prevention of and response to educational inequality

4. Improving society's response to educational inequality

5. Cooperation between institutions and systems in reducing educational inequality

6. Visibility of educational inequality

At the end of the focus group, participants had the opportunity to talk about aspects of educational exclusion that they consider to be important and that were not covered in the previously presented issues.

More detailed information about the research methodology can be found in Annex I of this publication.

1. Definition of educational inequality in early childhood and primary education

The analysis of the focus group content showed that the participants predominantly connected educational inequality with the concept of the violation of children's rights. They also described educational inequality as a multidimensional construct encompassing a range of aspects of inequality that children face in realising their right to education. These include: the possibility of accessing the education system; the availability of adequate system-level support to children and their families; and the achievement of educational outcomes that are in line with the potentials, abilities and interests of children.

Example:

> "… This relates to the infringement of children's fundamental rights, one of which is the right to education, since from the very start you have unequal access to education and unequal support received by children in education, which gives rise to educational inequality and which later results in inequality in educational outcomes."

The notion of educational inequality is about the (im)possibility of access to the system and about whether there is (in)appropriate access to the child within the system, as a consequence of the limitations of individuals, living conditions and the system.

Examples:

> "… As far as the system is concerned, it is the unavailability of certain services to the individual for various reasons… Living conditions do not allow individuals to use different educational resources, and their personal limitations, which can be a deficit or a surplus, then set them apart from the average."

> "Everyone is just telling her what to do. Someone is constantly suggesting what she should do, to be like Croatian children…. Dress like them, speak the language like them, come on, try a little more now, okay - now you'll get a grade of 1, but next week you have to get a grade of 5. There is always, you know, a pressure of some sort. Which is packaged in some kind of, how to put it, it does happen through kindness and support, but it is constant .. every week there is some new goal that she has to achieve and no one asks her how she really feels in all this and what kind of baggage she has come with…"

Participants highlighted the vicious circle of educational inequality, which due to the limited availability of quality education (and related support) leads to a decrease in educational aspirations, which adversely affects the opportunities for social inclusion of large numbers of young people.

Example:

> *"… Then we actually reduce their overall social inclusion because we just accept that they are in ancillary occupations, that they have second-rate grades… and we don't think about how to support them to feel good about themselves, to gain the conditions to learn… and to increase their educational aspirations."*

Educational inequality particularly affects disadvantaged children due to various vulnerability markers such as developmental difficulties, health status, behavioural problems, poverty, living in isolated, remote settlements, having low-educated parents or being children in alternative care. The participants agreed that educational inequality begins at birth and intensifies at some critical, transitional periods of life, such as enrolment in kindergarten, the transition from kindergartens to schools and the transition from one level of education to another. At the same time, participants that were educational practitioners (compared to representatives of faculties and public institutions) were more aware of aspects of educational inequality that they encounter in their professional work.

Example:

> *"It starts from birth in the parents' home because parents do not have basic competencies… nor social support for quality parenthood… a large number of children do not have a picture book in the family home, let alone any systematic educational support… Later, the key points are the transitions. When a child moves from a family home to a kindergarten and then from a kindergarten to a school. And then when the child goes from one education system to another …".*

2. Causes of educational inequality in early childhood and primary education

The prevailing view is that the causes of educational inequality are complex and diverse, stemming from a system of values and behaviours that are not driven by the welfare (best interests) of the child but by different particular interests of adults (e.g. parent-caregiver interests, extension of kindergarten hours, incomplete professional teams in kindergartens and schools, etc.). Certain erroneous paradigms and approaches to education further compound the problem, including issues at the level of education policies and regulations, unequal conditions in different communities and institutions (e.g. unavailability of hot meals, extended stays or of kindergartens themselves) and issues related to the of professionalism of teaching staff and the adequacy of their initial education and continuous professional development.

Examples:

> *"… That vertical aspect is missing, in terms of caring at the national level for what is happening at the local level."*

> *"I would emphasise the different financial capacities of local authorities as being a major problem …"*

> *"It's sad to see what kind of teachers we have and some of the attitudes they have towards children, not to mention children's rights."*

The discussion repeatedly emphasised the inflexibility and rigidity of regulations and educational institutions, which directly contributes to educational inequality of various vulnerable groups of children. On the one hand, certain technical criteria are insisted upon, which can prevent the expansion of educational programmes for children (e.g. ceiling height in educational institutions). On the other hand, pedagogical standards on the maximum number of children that can be included in an educational group are not respected. Interestingly, educational groups in kindergartens have a much less favourable child-educator ratio than the pupil-teacher ratio in primary schools. Precisely this circumstance points to the importance of better positioning early and pre-school education in the national education system, as an important prerequisite for the prevention of educational inequality.

Examples:

"I recognise the first and foremost problem as education policy itself, being vague, rigid and difficult to change."

"The national curriculum is unrecognisable in practice"

"… The educator in the group has 30 children… one with diabetes, one with motor difficulties and there is no caretaker (in the kindergarten)… no matter how high his professional knowledge, competencies and motivation may be, he simply cannot cope."

When it comes specifically to early and pre-school education, educational inequality is further exacerbated by:

- The territorial organisation of local authorities (e.g. *"… starting from the inclusion of children in pre-school institutions from the earliest age to social welfare decisions… all 576 (local authorities), or however many of us there are, regardless of whether it is a city of millions or almost millions, or some local authority with a population of 1000. We have exactly the same powers, but the possibilities are very, very, very different and they come in a very wide range, and unfortunately neither children nor adults are equal"*)

- Unequal criteria for enrolment and co-financing of children's participation in early and pre-school education programmes (e.g. *"for example, the criterion over which we constantly wrestle with local authorities, i.e. the criterion for residence of both parents in the same local authority area for allowing a child to enrol in kindergarten… or discrimination based on family status…"*)

- Lack of coherence of the system at the national level (e.g. *"… the major lack of coordination and connection between, for example, schools, the social welfare systems with its social welfare centres, the lack of information exchange, the insufficiently rapid exchange of information when it comes to helping children"*).

- Access to early and pre-school education as a service defined by a contract, where the child's right to education is not emphasised (e.g. *"… framing the whole concept as a service because it is actually a contract that can be terminated in the end… if this could be turned around and no longer perceived in this way, by state policy, then progress could be made towards eliminating inequalities…"*).

- Non-compliance with state pedagogical standards (e.g. *"… so instead of 22 children, and we know that all children don't always attend, we must now adhere to this new standard of 20 children. When, actually, we have examples where there are many more children. So, I mean, if we don't adhere to the standard and if it's not the same rule for everyone, then let's not even set such standards. Because it's so obvious, it's awful…"*).

All participants agree that educational inequality is an important and ubiquitous social problem that is neglected in public discourse, and which decision-makers often approach bureaucratically and administratively, without any real efforts that could lead to change, or to a culture and paradigm of non-discrimination.

Example:

"… Inequality in education is an extremely important social issue because it has a direct effect on the social and economic development of each community and society as a whole. And on sustainable development, if we want to be even more general. And that education is actually the only chance for many children and young people…"

The participants also emphasised that a sensationalist approach is often adopted to this topic, and that reactions are often responses to tragic events or public (media) pressure. Many participants have the experience of insufficient cooperation between institutions, but it improves when it comes to resolving specific cases and in specific local environments.

Examples:

"Sometimes the reporting is correct, often it isn't, but it actually comes to the fore through an individual case that is very current and that features the violation of a child's rights, which manages to catch the attention of the public for various reasons. This may be because the parents also turned to the media. Actually, when parents write to us they very often say: If the situation does not improve and if this problem is not solved I'll go immediately to the newspaper or some media of any kind or I will write on my blog about it. So actually I would say that people are already in a position of despair, anger and some frustration when they reach that point that they themselves present their case to the media, or rather the case of their child in a specific situation."

"Well, I think that in fact people cooperate well ... we have a lot of examples of really good cooperation, which of course again depends on individuals. And I think that's the basic problem. I don't think the systems are coordinated. And at that level, they really do contradict each other illogically, and that's a problem that drives people crazy in practice and makes them inefficient."

The previous conclusions stem from a categorisation of the responses of the focus group participants. Based on this, the components of educational inequality can be singled out as follows (Figure 1):
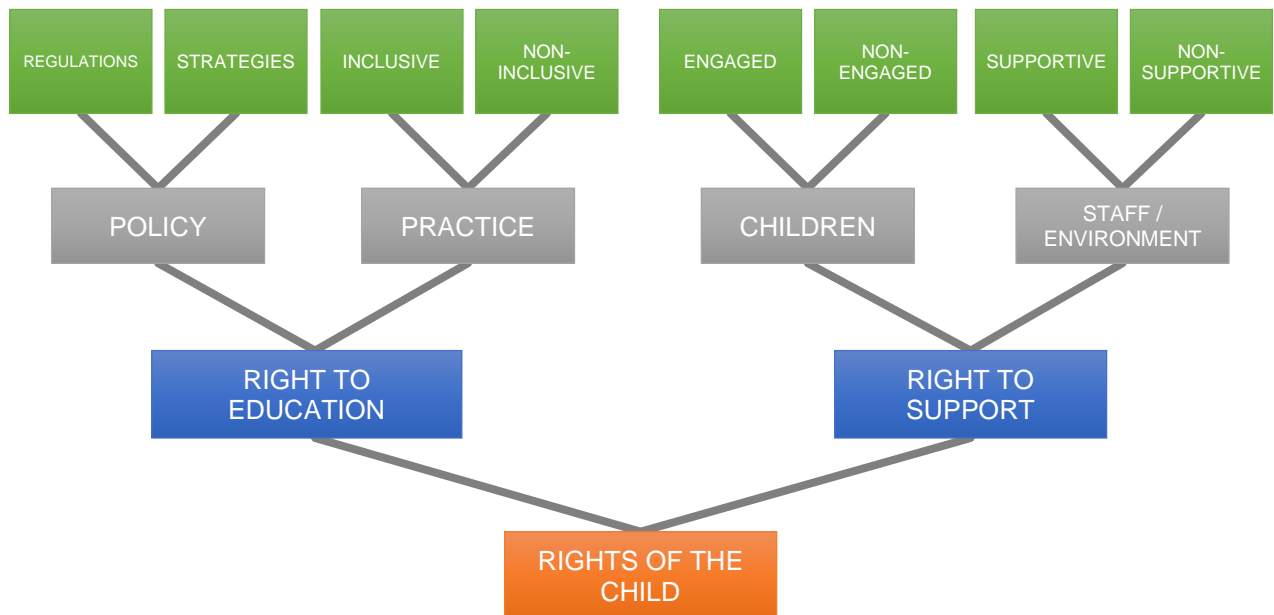
Figure 1. Components of educational inequality

The analysis of Figure 1 shows that there are many factors in the education system at the level of early and pre-school education and primary education that contribute to educational inequality. This is reflected in the highly disparate opportunities provided to disadvantaged children by educational institutions, which is partly a result of vague regulations and partly a result of the inability of local authorities to provide appropriate support to children, families and educational staff (whether professional support staff or other support staff). Emphasis was also placed on the inconsistency of personal paradigms of educators, since there are educators that do not understand the concept of children's rights and that are prone to various discriminatory and non-inclusive practices. At the same time, there are highly engaged educators that oppose discrimination, become personally involved in and contribute significantly to the prevention of educational inequality. The practices of educators are partly conditioned by spatial and material possibilities (e.g. having a large number of children in a group), and partly by personal values and competencies. This all affects the quality of children's participation in the educational process: children who do not have the opportunity to participate in quality education and are not adequately supported become disengaged from education and their educational aspirations remain low and/or unrealised.

3. Prevention and responses to educational inequality in early childhood and primary education

The opportunities identified by the focus group participants regarding the prevention of educational inequality are in line with the understanding of the concept as described above, and hence relate to structural, institutional and personal levels. Regardless of the level, the most important components of the prevention of educational inequality are the responsibility and professionalism of all stakeholders (politicians, head teachers, professional staff). It is also important to ensure that the value of learning as a process can be recognised in the education system, in contrast to today's prevailing orientation towards learning outcomes. As expected,

the most important aspect is to ensure that the goal of all activities and measures is the welfare of the child. At the structural level, this requires:

- Clearer and more coherent education policy that will position early and pre-school education in the national education system, in order to reduce regional *inequalities* (e.g. *"everyone had their own policy, and the ministry, i.e. education policy, did not offer any solution or interventions, to be more precise. Certain individuals have further compounded the problem…"*).

- More flexible regulations that take into account the different opportunities of disadvantaged children (e.g. *"… we should rethink this whole concept, see how the education system can be more flexible for these children both in terms of teaching organisation and in terms of certain rules and regulations, and not 'you have to finish this and that, and later you can go to adult education', and so on, because I think this is really, really a violation of their rights"*).

- Ensuring minimum quality standards in all institutions of early and pre-school education and primary education, with mechanisms for their verification (e.g. *"We have a state pedagogical standard that does not allow to open a group because its ceiling is a bit too low, say by 20 centimetres. And we have an open secret that in Zagreb and in another part of Croatia the kindergarten groups are overcrowded. And I don't know that the ministry has ever sent an inspection there or that, if you'll excuse me, the ombudswoman ever said that this was wrong. And it's an open secret, everybody knows this"*).

- Unifying national strategies that will contribute to real changes in the system (e.g. *"I think it is incredibly important that everything is part of the same policy and same area of concern and that all our policies and strategies are connected so that someone starts knowing what they are doing ..."*).

- Professionalism of educational staff by ensuring the appropriateness of both initial education and of continuing professional development (e.g.. *"... so, since we have a profession, which implies a certain amount of knowledge and specialist, professional responsibility, then surely we can reach certain decisions that are not always strictly prescribed. Because when certain situations occur, at the end of the day the Coronavirus happened to us, these earthquakes happened, you have to make decisions within a few days. You don't have time to prescribe, to create rules, protocols. So I think that people have lost this feeling that they have the right to react based on their common sense and their profession."*).

- (Re)defining pedagogical standards so that they ensure the welfare of the child as much as possible (e.g. *"we are boasting about something that we should be embarrassed about in my view, because we have not defined what the child's need is, what the child's welfare is. We are adapting to something else, but there you go… "*).

At the institutional level, in cooperation with local communities and local authorities, it is necessary to ensure:

- The implementation of existing regulations in a manner consistent with the rights of the child, i.e. the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (e.g. *"… we constantly have to emphasise all over again what the convention is, what it contains and even the positions of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which interprets certain directives of the convention. We often have to cite or remind them of the convention, and I would especially emphasise the child's right to participation... This is a*

right that encounters so much misunderstanding, which we often face, that there is a huge space for working with educators in this area").

- Networking and cooperation of all stakeholders and systems responsible for ensuring the rights of the child (e.g. *"everyone has a different piece of information, a different view of the problem from their perspective, and no one has yet managed to summarise this in a single narrative, to understand what others know, think and need to pass on as information in order to actually determine what we will do with a child and what is in his or her best interest. And everyone is involved!"*).

- Acknowledgement of the topic of educational inequality in official documents and communication channels of kindergartens and schools (e.g. *"… in general, that public space that is not necessarily related to media such as web portals and the like, but we also communicate through our websites, portals, via Facebook pages ... That is, all of us that are public institutions. So that is also a space that could be used because we could refer to these topics and we could the lead in addressing them. So, I think that media would definitely, if nothing else, copy that information, since that is obviously what they have been doing lately…"*).

- Continuous and quality training of educational staff, as opposed to fragmented approaches that amount to formal participation at conferences (e.g. *"We went through these trainings, but no one requested feedback to find out if we were satisfied with the trainings and what we actually learned. Some say that if they had, the results would be unsatisfactory, as it would become clear what huge amounts of money and time have been invested for something that is largely impracticable."*).

- Adequate spatial, material and human resources, including support staff and teaching assistants of various profiles (e.g. "*We have been balancing with teaching assistants in a grey zone for years. So we have a fantastic idea to work on the inclusion of children with developmental difficulties, but we still don't have a clearly defined profession of teaching assistant, so we end up with a lot of frustrated people who don't have their place in the sun in that system, even though they really want to do that job…"*; *"And our support services? They are so small, they are so inadequate – it's, it's enough to make you want to scream"*; "*… And how is the school equipped? Are the classrooms equipped? How does this influence, do children have opportunities to, I don't know, carry out experiments and take part in competitions, or further develop in a field of science? How does this open or close opportunities for them later?"*).

Last but not least, the issue of personal responsibility of staff at all levels of the system, from ministries and academia to schools and kindergartens, was also highlighted. The focus group participants agreed that even in uniform conditions, different practices remain, and these largely depend on the responsibility of individuals (e.g. *"will they be in the process of researching better solutions or will they hide behind bad educational policies"*; *"…to do everything I can in the given circumstances and in the conditions that are available to me…"*). Accountability implies professional autonomy and quality assurance in all segments of the system, and it should be inclusive and based on a participatory approach towards learners ("*we should not speak on behalf of someone, but we should ask that person things that are important, i.e. open a space for that voice to come out."*).

4. Improving society's response to educational inequality in early childhood and primary education

Of course, the complexity of educational inequality points to the need to take numerous measures and activities ("*You cannot just single out one measure, but need to look at it as a whole. So it is not just about professional development of educators, nor just about the system, but everything needs to go in parallel ...*"). No isolated measure or activity alone can prevent this problem, and the best measure is *"to realise the rights of the child because in that way we can teach the child about his/her obligations and responsibilities, which will then help him/her to participate normally in equal life as an adult.*" Initiatives of individual schools, associations and local authorities were also highlighted (e.g. participation in EU projects, involvement in step-by-step education, opening and equipping of educational institutions), as well as initiatives of individuals who participate in creating public policies, training educational workers, etc.

A combined top-down and bottom-up approach was recommended, combining changes in legislation with individual actions, solving specific problems, improving working conditions and involvement in EU projects. The most important measure is the need to change the system of values and attitudes towards children who are victims of educational inequality. Inclusive education that is available to all from an early age is key to preventing educational inequality, regardless of its pattern.

Examples:

> *"Education as a value. The national curriculum for early and pre-school education does not place learning as a value, but knowledge. And knowledge, especially in modern times, is so relevant and changeable that really everything we knew yesterday and today is no longer relevant. Or there is simply a lot we don't know and every day we are realising how much we don't know. This means that education policy should place education itself as a value, and then we should certainly discuss the personal paradigms of both teachers and their competencies and parents, and ultimately those who participate directly in the process, including pupils."*

> *"… The whole system of support and assistance to children with developmental difficulties, children with behavioural problems or those at risk of developing behavioural problems, other vulnerable groups… This becomes very pronounced here, in the system, so when the child is already in the system actually a whole range of problems and inequalities can arise due to some system-level problems, due to not solving a system-level problem. Or due to certain approaches by educators who may act in a way that is unprofessional or unethical, possibly even illegal, then they basically violate their rights, which leads to inequality within the system itself"*.

In general, it can be concluded that the focus group participants advocate an integrated and holistic approach to addressing educational inequality, extending from individuals to the national system. This approach places an emphasis on responsibilities, developing competencies of all stakeholders in this area, networking and connecting people and formulating an inclusive education policy. Such an approach, with an emphasis on accessibility of early and pre-school education, could address all forms and levels of educational inequality.

The components of this approach are shown in Figure 2 and indicate the preconditions of society's response to educational inequality, bearing in mind the understanding of this concept as a violation of children's right to education. The response requires appropriate support mechanisms both for disadvantaged children and for educators that are directly in charge of implementing the educational process.
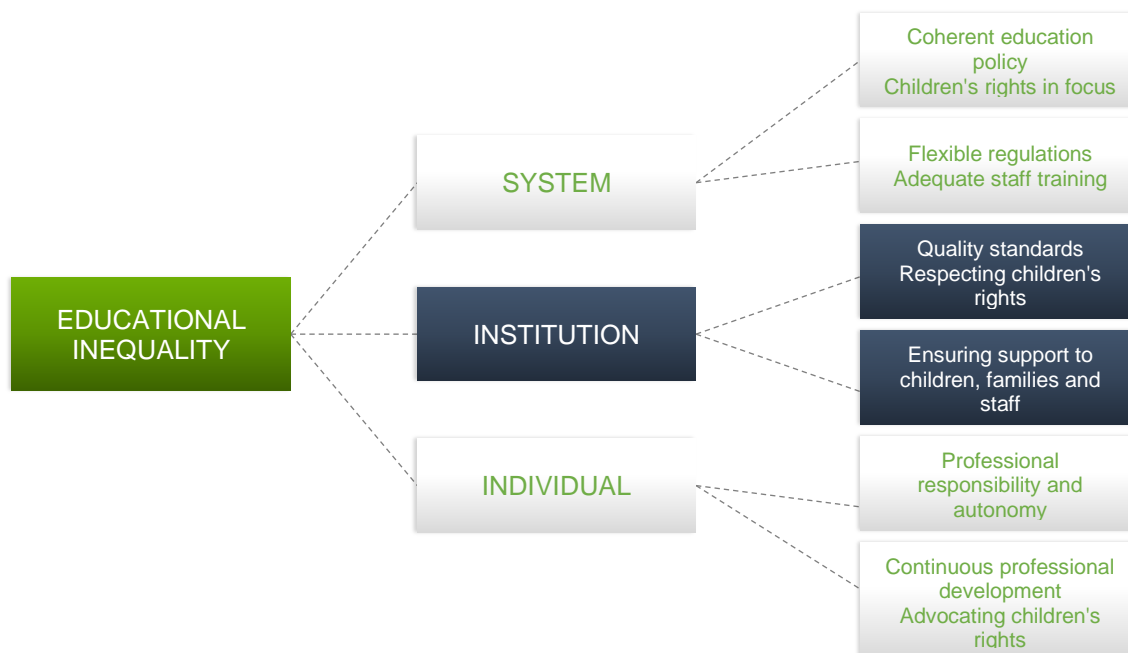
Figure 2. Prevention of educational inequality

Conclusion

During the focus group, the following needs were emphasised to address educational inequality at the level of early and pre-school and at the level of primary education:

- increasing the accessibility of education (in terms of availability and affordability, but also measures to support children, parents and employees);

- ensuring the adequacy of curricula that will reflect diversity, i.e. respect for all children and their families and enable the development of their potentials (including engagement in education and appropriate educational aspirations);

- ensuring high professionalism of educational staff that enables professional autonomy, based on quality education;

- defining policies and procedures that support disadvantaged children and focus on the welfare of the child;

- networking at all levels and reaching an agreement and common understanding of the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders in the education system in the prevention of educational inequality.

The focus group participants demonstrated an adequate understanding of the concept of educational inequality, with the understanding of practitioners being more fragmented than members of academia and national or local government stakeholders (either due to a focus on individual levels of education or due to specific causes of educational inequality). This result additionally indicates the need for networking, exchange of experience and cooperation in creating public policies that will enable greater respect for the rights of all children to quality education and equal educational opportunities, which is also the main goal of this thematic network.

It is of utmost importance to pay more attention to the accessibility of early and pre-school education to all children, in order to ensure that disadvantaged children enter the system of compulsory (primary) education on an equal basis with others. This can contribute to counteract the range of life disadvantages faced by children at an early stage and eliminate the adverse impact these can have on children's education and development. In primary education, it is important to respect the diversity of children, especially in terms of setting high expectations of all pupils (with the provision of appropriate support), so that children are not directed towards low educational attainment and aspirations at the beginning of education. Although the focus group participants are engaged on a personal level in preventing and responding to educational inequality, they point out the existing limitations that weaken the effects of their efforts (*"we are driving a slalom, repairing damage"*).

The common message of all participants in this focus group is that things can no longer continue in this way, and that encouraging changes in attitudes towards educational inequality is a fundamental social problem. The participants expected that the project 'Lifelong Learning for All Network' will initiate the expected changes.

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2. SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Educational inequalities start at the level of pre-school education and continue throughout the primary and secondary levels of education. Pupils in primary schools whose parents attained a higher level of education and have a higher socioeconomic status (SES) achieve statistically significant better academic achievement than pupils whose parents have a lower level of education or lower socioeconomic status (Babarović, Burušić and Šakić, 2009; Jokić and Ristić Dedić, 2010). Furthermore, research findings point to significant correlation between the socioeconomic and sociocultural backgrounds of pupils and their performance in secondary school and aspirations to pursue higher education (Košutić, Puzić and Doolan, 2015; Puzić, Gregurović and Košutić, 2016; Puzić, Odak and Šabić, 2019). In line with this, pupils from economically and culturally privileged families will more frequently attend a more academically oriented secondary school programme, whereas pupils from less privileged families will more frequently enrol in secondary vocational school programmes (Farnell et al., 2011; Puzić, Šabić and Odak, 2021). Matković (2010) states that leaving secondary school early is related to the lower education level of parents and reduced household income. The references listed here also refer to elements of vulnerability of secondary school pupils regarding their socioeconomic and sociocultural backgrounds, but educational inequalities may emerge from other specific individual circumstances or from belonging to other vulnerable groups. For instance, research on LGBT issues in Croatian secondary schools showed that the pupils who experienced same-sex attraction also experienced more relational and physical abuse and they also felt they received less support from their teachers and less respect from the pupils who had never experienced such emotions (Jugović and Bezinović, 2020). We were interested in gaining insight from important stakeholders in secondary education and their experiences regarding vulnerable pupils and unequal educational opportunities, with the intention to create a broader comprehension of educational inequalities in secondary education.

The focus group on secondary education was held on 12 April 2021 and out of a total of nine representatives invited to take part, a total of seven representatives participated in the focus group:

- Ministry of Science and Education - Sector for the Gifted and Children with Disabilities and Information Support of the Education System
- Education and Teacher Training Agency
- Agency for Vocational Education and Training
- Association of Croatian Secondary School Principals
- National Centre for External Evaluation of Education
- Office for Human and National Minority Rights of the Government of the Republic of Croatia
- Croatian Parliament - Education, Science and Culture Committee.

The aim of the focus group was to establish how decision-makers and other relevant stakeholders acting in the field of secondary education perceive educational inequalities and the possibilities of their reduction or elimination.

The following research questions were formulated in accordance with the overall goal of the research:

1. How do decision-makers/stakeholders in the field of secondary education perceive educational inequalities in secondary education in Croatia?

2. How do decision-makers/stakeholders in the field of secondary education see the possibilities of reducing educational inequalities in secondary education in Croatia?

3. What are the current practices of decision-makers/stakeholders and associated institutions regarding the reduction of educational inequalities in secondary education?

Further information on the methodology is available as an annex to this publication.

1. Perceptions of educational inequality in secondary education

Asked to describe educational inequalities in secondary education in Croatia, focus group participants identified, on one hand, factors related to the common traits of students and their families, and on the other, structural inequalities related to differences in material and other aspects of attendance and teaching in schools. When it comes to inequalities arising from differences in the family background of students, participants point out in particular the problems associated with poverty or unfavourable socioeconomic situation of students' families:

> *"The first would be everything connected to and stemming from their [students] family situation, their socioeconomic status, employability of parents, family income, quality of housing, quality of life, the fact whether the children live in two-parent families and so on, to put it simply."*

> *"... many of them do not have their own room, their parents cannot provide a quiet corner in a studio apartment or a small house. They do not have the same conditions for work and study as children who have their own room, their own computer, unlimited access to internet and so on."*

> *"I would definitely agree with the statement that poverty is one of the main causes of inequality in education."*

The participants also identified inequalities related to ethnicity, i.e. the unfavourable status of students of the Roma minority and their underrepresentation in secondary education:

> *"... and that is that in Croatia currently about 22% of Roma children aged 14 to 19 are in school. So, less than a quarter of Roma who should attend secondary school..."*

One of the underlying issues is the "enormous material deprivation" of Roma families, which is correspondingly followed by a low level of education of the parents. The latter often results in insufficient parental support in learning, which has been particularly evident in the context of online teaching in secondary and primary schools:

> *"In Croatia, 92.4% of Roma live below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold. Apart from that, the Roma are uneducated. Adult Roma are uneducated, so they can't support their children, in the same way that they could not… they don't support them in education, which is evident now more than ever, especially in the context of this crisis when*

children relied heavily on parental support for different content, especially in primary education, more than in secondary education, taking into account that 17% of Roma women are illiterate."

In addition, participants pointed out the wider consequences of online teaching for all students from socioeconomically deprived families who often did not have adequate conditions for working at home, including insufficient technical capabilities to attend online classes (computer equipment, internet connection, etc.):

"So last year, some of our students actually followed these online classes via their smartphones, but not everyone had access to the Internet, i.e. the same quality of Internet access. So, they couldn't access certain digital content, they couldn't turn in their homework on time, they couldn't do their research, and that was already an existing problem with assigning homework or an essay, some students couldn't admit they had no internet access at home and that they could not research additional content that would, say, allow for a higher grade. It could also be seen in the way they submitted essays they were required to do, some students turned in their assignments via flash memory or other similar device, others sent it by e-mail, while some would print out and edit the copy to perfection. And after a while, one easily realises that it is not a matter of being informed or computer literate, but simply that they do not have a computer at home, do not have access to their own computer or the Internet. This proved to be the key issue... That access, elementary even, or the basic requirements to attend classes, they are not equal."

"For instance, they [thinking of students living in unfavourable socioeconomic conditions], even when present in class, if we are talking about online classes, do not want to enable their video or audio because some of them live in a high-risk environment and do not want others to see in what kind of circumstances they live, where they live or what their living space looks like."

When it comes to vulnerable groups of students, one of the participants points out that the education system typically addresses a limited number of vulnerable groups, while neglecting, among other things, students who come from dysfunctional families:

"Well, talking about this issue, I think we often focus on or fall into the trap of always targeting two to three specific groups of students within the education system. These are always Roma and students with disabilities who, of course, need support, we do focus on them, but we leave aside certain categories of students who, due to various compromising family circumstances, and problematic family conditions, simply, unfortunately get put aside and are not recognised within the education system. Here I could primarily talk, for example, about children and young people who come from dysfunctional marriages, going through divorce lawsuits, children who, unfortunately, have parents with certain mental health issues, children who are subject to various forms of neglect and even abuse, etc."

Regarding vulnerable groups of students, the participants noted that we have a wide range of young people not recognised by the system and who should be the focus of educational policies. Among them are students with mental health problems, LGBTIQ + students, migrant children and underage mothers:

"On the other hand, these are also children with various mental health problems, school phobias, for example, where you have a situation where it is very difficult to raise awareness of this in the education system ... where psychiatric recommendations get ignored, or the problem is simply not recognised. So, it is often said that these children want to avoid classes, so they hide behind specific issues… a very simplified story, and this is also present in the field."

"... we must not forget children who are LGBTIQ + people, who certainly experience discrimination in terms of ... harassment, and harassment under the Croatian Anti-Discrimination Act is considered discrimination or unequal treatment, so I hope that someone speaks up on this issue."

"... Croatia does not have a situation like some other EU members where we have to take in a large number of migrant children and adolescents, but they are also in a very specific situation, if we consider this period, so to speak, of their travels from their country of origin, through various countries to Greece, Turkey, to camps, to entry into the EU… They also pose a challenging issue that should be the focus of education policy-makers, especially in light of these months, and in some cases even years of absence from school. This is also a serious issue, what to do with that group."

"You have situations, not that common, but you have a situation with girls who get pregnant during their secondary education or even higher education and their partner leaves them, their family rejects them, and you have no answer for these kinds of situations. You have a girl with potential, with good, positive educational prospects, and she has to stop her education..."

In addition to difficulties related to students' family situations and family backgrounds, participants placed significant emphasis on educational inequalities related to differences in material and other conditions of attendance and teaching in schools. Some that stand out are differences in access to school equipment, unprofessional approaches to teaching, differences in funding available to schools in different cities and counties, etc .:

"So the conditions in schools are different, they are not equal. ... and this is also an aspect of this inequality."

" [School] equipment, even of the most basic sort, the elementary requirements for teaching have not been met, they are not equal."

"Then I would mention infrastructure, not only ICT infrastructure, but basic infrastructure, school equipment in Croatia, different levels of school equipment."

The most notable are the differences in the level of equipment of vocational schools that emphasise the transfer and adoption of practical skills directly reliant on the technical equipment of schools:

"Talking about vocational education, vocational school students can particularly suffer from this level of inequality in terms of school equipment or the lack thereof. Vocational education primarily teaches practical skills and the quantity, level, and quality of skills students acquire may depend on how well the school is equipped, or what kind of laboratories, classrooms or workshops the school has. This is what I imply considering vocational education, a level of inequality that needs to be taken into account, one they cannot affect, but it certainly affects them."

When it comes to differences in educational infrastructure, one of the participants notes differences in the support of the local community regarding the availability of food, books and transportation for commuter students. There is also a frequent lack of public services in smaller communities that cannot adequately help students with disabilities, who are consequently often deprived of early intervention and professional support (e.g. psychiatric / psychological). The non-cooperation and insufficient help and support for schools by social welfare centres have also been mentioned:

> *"So we have these differences not only in the cost of basic education but also the availability of food, secondary education, long-distance transport, and textbooks particularly because we have huge differences in local support, some cities have more money, or counties, counties that have more money, so they can fully co-finance long-distance school transportation, others don't. The state subsidises only one fixed part. The same goes applies to the cost of food, or the availability of food..."*

> *"... I think a whole other issue is about services that should help these children locally. There aren't many cities like Zagreb, which have a child and youth protection centre, a child psychiatric centre and so on. We have small communities and getting to Zagreb also poses an issue for parents. I think that in recent years a great focus has been placed on teaching assistants, and we have put aside the importance of early intervention and professional support to these children during their upbringing and education."*

> *"I would also add that the quality of cooperation with social welfare centres is a great difficulty for us in secondary education. There are few of them and they obviously lack capacity. And the problems we face, as schools, because we seek help and support from social welfare centres, with these uncooperative families who have a lot of problems and do not have adequate support and conditions for students. And it happens that we don't get an answer for months, we get some administrative answer that is of no use. The issue only comes to light when an incident occurs."*

Speaking about the differences in school equipment and capacity for teaching, the participants especially emphasised the issue of human resources, primarily "unprofessional" approaches to teaching and a likely lack of motivation for some teachers. Additionally, participants highlighted insufficient support and supervision of school staff, which is reflected in the differences in the quality of teaching in some schools:

> *"... human resources in education also have an impact on achievement. I would primarily mention, without belittling the competencies of teachers, situations where we have unprofessional teaching substitutes in certain areas, a deficit of trained staff ... if we are talking about equalizing as many opportunities for quality education..."*

> *"Here I am not only taking into account technical and material capacity, but also, given these conditions, I want to primarily stress an issue that is very difficult to address, and that is human resources. It is not just a question of unprofessional teaching, but a very weak or declining motivation to work in any position in the education system in Croatia. ... It used to be only in smaller communities, but now it can be seen in Zagreb as well. It used to be the case for certain STEM areas, professional fields, and now it is present in almost all existing fields."*

> *"I advocate ... a system of supervision. We see now that our main source of quality, our motivated teachers, are burning out at work, especially now when they have only recently found themselves in situations they have not dealt with before, that required*

organizing their private life and their work in a whole new environment, and I think some new problems have arisen around it or have become more pronounced than they used to be."

Participants also highlighted the difficulties in hiring experts to work with students with disabilities citing insufficient quotas of students at the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences. Differences in school management have also been pointed out, which may adversely affect the position of different groups of vulnerable students, especially in the context of online classes that stressed the importance of school support for the students. In this sense, educational inequalities relate to differences in the quality of education, often depending on school management or professional staff:

"One major and alarming example is what is being done with support for students with disabilities. We have the consent of the Ministry to employ educational rehabilitation professionals, but so few are enrolled in the only faculty in Croatia providing this study programme that some schools… for example I know a school in Pula that have been advertising a vacancy for the last six years and there are no applications. Support cannot be provided in this way then."

"... when we talk about categories of children with disabilities or gifted students, they simply do not have all their needs met, and this largely depends on school management, professional staff and some other elements for which children, students are not to blame."

"What I also think is very important, and this is an example of how schools differ in the conditions they provide, referring to my field, is the manner in which the school is run or provides support to its students... ... So as far as this last year is concerned [at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic] one of the issues that really stood out was precisely the range of inequality in secondary education and different approaches..."

2. Opportunities for reducing educational inequality in secondary education

Answering the question on the characteristics of the education system that should be changed in order to reduce inequalities in secondary education, the participants singled out the provision of material preconditions on the one hand, and proposals related to equalizing the quality of education on the other. Regarding material conditions, elements that stood out were the provision of free textbooks, transportation and a healthy diet. When it comes to nutrition, participants mentioned the problem of the lack of school kitchens in secondary schools and the availability of usually unhealthy food from school vending machines. Free transportation was also mentioned by many, emphasizing that not all students have equal access to schools, i.e. that transportation costs in some parts of Croatia are borne by students' parents, which leads to inequality. Another proposal was to improve public transport (e.g. train schedules) so that students would not have to wait long for transportation, and the solution is seen in the redistribution of public budgeting. Free textbooks have also been singled out as an important factor in reducing inequality, citing the example of some students being forced to choose schools in another county / city where they are provided with free textbooks:

"A hungry child cannot focus on learning. So, if possible, an organised system, of free meals in schools would solve this problem. … And here, together, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health might be able to do something to ensure that children have some kind of a healthy meal."

"Also, transport, i.e. the accessibility of school, could be equalised here, where the state, I think, still subsidises 75% of intercity transport for secondary school students… to see how to secure the remaining funds, to provide some kind of equality, available to all children in Croatia."

"… It is very important that in secondary education, transport and textbooks are available to all under equal conditions. Textbooks, for example, in the city of Zagreb are provided for all students, even those from extremely rich families, whereas in other areas not even those from poor families receive any."

Several participants stressed the introduction of single shift schooling as the most important structural change that implies the aforementioned harmonisation of material conditions in all schools:

"So, when we talk about material conditions, what we said about inequalities in schools and between schools, when we take into account the quality of education and the conditions in which the schools operate, I think that by opting for single shift schooling and all-day attendance, children could study and do their homework at school, meaning they would no longer have to take their work home. Maybe they have no one to help or guide them at home. It would be much easier at school with professional supervision."

One of the participants also pointed out measures related to gender inequality, measures aimed at eliminating period poverty as an instrument to help empower secondary school students at the structural level.

"… removing this barrier of period poverty, especially for girls, and at school, which prevents them from performing their school duties."

Another approach to reducing inequalities in secondary education is aimed at equalizing the quality of education by providing qualified teaching to all students, then through evaluation as feedback, through quality teaching of interdisciplinary topics, through strengthening professional support in schools, and through peer support and greater parental involvement. These measures are seen as instrumental fin levelling the quality of education and consequently educational opportunities for all secondary school students.

In consideration of the proposal for ensuring equal quality of education in all schools, participants raised the issue of licensing teachers, educators, and principals, which would to a great extent harmonise standards and expectations of educational staff. Another proposal was the reform of teacher training studies and the promotion of employment in shortage occupations such as mathematics, physics and informatics teachers, with the aim of high professional teaching standards:

"Also, the third thing I would like to talk about are the examples where we have unqualified substitute teachers in certain places, a shortage of certain staff, and this is one of the issues the state should place special emphasis on in creating education policy."

The problem of professional burnout of high-quality and motivated teachers was also discussed, and the proposed solution was to ensure a system of supervision for teachers. Evaluation was also been highlighted as a way to reduce inequalities, by providing feedback to students, parents and teachers on their progress. It may help identify weaknesses in

education, and groups that are particularly vulnerable, for example during pandemic or other challenging circumstances:

"I would just like to mention that it's high time to introduce external evaluation that would ensure quality in such a way that each parent would receive information on their child's competencies. These would not be grades, as we said, grades are not the only means of evaluating one's knowledge, there is also feedback. And that would be a good way to reduce disparity. We now have a clear confirmation that students who come from families of better socioeconomic status also achieve better results."

Ensuring quality teaching of cross-subject topics has also been recognised as a possible source of support for reducing inequalities in secondary education, as two participants noted:

"The topics we now cover in cross-curricular subjects are very important to us. These cross-curricular subjects are all excellent and ingenious, but they are more or less nothing but ink on paper. They are very difficult to implement, their implementation is not supervised or evaluated. If those competencies, gained from personal and social development, civic education, and financial literacy and so on were realised, they could actually contribute to reducing precisely these social inequalities. We know that children also educate their parents so in this way, they might even better manage their lives and be able to seek help, be even more competent to seek help."

"...the cross-curricular topics of civic education and entrepreneurship are very important not only for further personal development during secondary education, but also for levelling the playing field after completing their schooling. I think it is also important to mention one other cross-curricular topic that unfortunately did not take root in the system itself, and I hope it will, and that is learning how to learn. As we have already mentioned when discussing the previous two questions, not all children are provided with the same opportunities and now in this education system they have some kind of supervision, both parental and teacher. However, when they enter the tertiary education system then they are really left to their own devices. If they have difficulty learning, or do not know how to learn, they are faced with serious issues. I think that a system including this notion would greatly help children to address these challenges from the very beginning."

One of the issues highlighted as being particularly relevant was stronger professional-psychological-pedagogical support, both in the form of support for students' mental health and the form of professional school counselling. Many participants pointed out that there is a rise in mental health problems among students. It is currently difficult for students to get an appointment with psychiatrists, and school cooperation with social care centres is not adequate (due to the lack of capacity of these centres). Therefore, it is considered crucial that all students have the opportunity to receive adequate care in all parts of Croatia. Another proposal was to ensure a sufficient number of pedagogues and psychologists in schools. Furthermore, some participants emphasised the importance of professional orientation:

"And maybe through secondary schools, we could strengthen this part of professional school counselling a little, so that children are more empowered, then we could better determine their potential and work on developing that potential."

"Also, what I think we should do here, when talking about professional orientation, I think we should have a more meaningful discussion on career management programmes and simply confront youth with the whole situation on the labour market, the needs of the labour market, and they can simply do the math on their chances for potential employment."

"… I think what our system lacks, and we should start with that from the beginning of primary education, is professional school counselling, and someone, like some other countries have, who is in school but is not a member of professional support staff. Someone like our class teachers or other professors, who are assigned a number of students and provide individual counselling, not in terms of coping with life hardships, but in terms of professional development, career, reinforcement of advantages, overcoming weaknesses in academic achievement, or other professional goals."

In addition to professional support, participants identified peer support and greater parental participation as another way of reducing inequalities in secondary education:

"… We know that peer influence is very important at that age and that's something I think we make the least use of in secondary education. … Educating peers to help, to cooperate, in every sense, it would greatly contribute to this goal. … I think that it should not be left to chance, there really should be a programme in every school where they could maximise the potential of peer support and get much better results."

"So, parents could also participate more actively in some school activities…parents, those who are willing to cooperate, who have certain competencies, who have the resources and can, in different ways, then contribute through various projects, to overcome these inequalities, or to get them involved through cooperation and conversations with other parents. We have also noticed that parents, not only in primary school, but during secondary education of their children, still ask how to be a good parent, what to do in different kinds of situations, how to provide support to the child, whether to do what others do, etc. This is of course related to the prevention of all undesirable types of behaviour."

As an immediate response to the challenges of education during the pandemic, a recovery curriculum has been proposed as a priority for all schools:

"What I think we can continue to do in any case, and what lies ahead for us now and in the immediate future is that recovery curriculum. And I think that is now the number one priority for all schools. We currently manage in different ways, the best we can, we combine the As, the Bs, the Cs ... However, we hope for that light at the end of the tunnel when we will all return to this regular way of life, learning and school."

Speaking about ways to reduce inequalities in education, two opposing views were noted. One is that the fight against poverty should take place at the level of decision-makers, i.e. discreetly, so as not to emphasise who is different or who lives in unfavourable socioeconomic conditions, negatively affecting vulnerable students. The other is that public campaigns are important because they raise awareness and inform members of vulnerable groups about their rights and opportunities (e.g. regarding the inclusion of Roma in education).

A positive feature of the Croatian education system that should be maintained in order to reduce educational inequalities is the low rate of early school leaving. As one participant noted:

> "However, what I would like to point out is the positive aspect of the Croatian secondary education system, and is something to maintain or further improve on, and that is the low early school leaving rate. We do have a low number of students who completely drop out of secondary school and we need to be aware of that, and we need to highlight this as our achievement that we have maintained for decades and further enquire as to how this even came to be. What I think is happening is that we do care for our students."

The last topic of the focus group was the possibility of using good examples from other countries in efforts to reduce inequalities in education, as well as relying on public documents and strategies that can be used as guidelines in the efforts to reduce educational inequality, such as the Croatian Strategy of Education, Science and Technology (OG 124/2014) and the Council Recommendation Establishing the European Child Guarantee EU (2021).

3. Current practices of stakeholders for reducing educational inequality in secondary education

Support at the structural level (Ministry of Science and Education, Croatian Parliament, Agencies)

Representatives of various stakeholders at the structural level noted different education policy measures under their jurisdiction that are being implemented. They mainly relate to the inclusion and support of vulnerable groups by providing additional material resources such as scholarships, subsidised transport and food, and by providing teaching assistants. Participants concluded these measures are aimed at students in unfavourable socioeconomic conditions, students of the Roma national minority and students with disabilities.

Support at the level of the education system primarily refers to measures of subsidies and scholarships in secondary education for children living in unfavourable socioeconomic conditions and students with disabilities. Support for students with disabilities is provided in the form of teaching, as well as transport, food and didactic equipment. At the central level, intercity transport is subsidised for all secondary school students:

> "Primarily, when discussing this subject, and I think that most of you or all of you know this, that the ministry traditionally announces public calls and tenders every year, primarily for different types of scholarships for children and youth living in unfavourable socioeconomic situations for secondary and higher education. Of course, this includes specific scholarships for students belonging to the Roma community, and for students with disabilities. We provide accessible transportation for students with disabilities."

The system of measures also refers to promoting the inclusion of children belonging to the Roma national minority in the education system and supporting their long term education. This support is primarily reflected in the provision of scholarships and the dissemination of information on the rights and benefits that Roma children can access in the education system:

> "Namely, we have prepared an infomercial for students, members of the Roma national minority, which provides insight into all the rights and benefits they have in the education system. We have also prepared promotional leaflets providing comprehensive information, because their rights are scattered everywhere."

As another way of reducing educational inequalities, participants highlighted competence centres as means of raising the quality of vocational education, which would provide support for vocational school students who, in the opinion expressed, are in an unequal position compared to students attending other secondary education programmes.

Support at school level

In addition to the measures for the reduction of inequalities at the structural level, participants proposed measures at institutional/school level, indicating options of choosing programmes of different duration, provision of information related to support in learning and further education. Among the opportunities discussed were attending shorter, two-year vocational programmes that would allow students, most often members of vulnerable groups or those with previous educational failures, to acquire qualifications. School management, professionals and teachers provide students with information on various opportunities available within the system that could aid their educational success. Students are also provided with information on the possibilities of further education and employment:

> *"We try to inform them about their life possibilities. These are scholarships, possibilities of supplementary and additional classes organised at the school; some extracurricular activities, free time activities that they can attend for free or subsidised student projects they can participate in."*

One participant stated that, during the pandemic, her school observed the needs of its students and sought to provide individual learning support to each student:

> *"What I can say from the example of our school is that we really spent a lot of time looking into the needs of students, monitoring the situation they found themselves in from March last year up to today, so that the school could provide some answers or support in the face of these needs, regardless whether it was about* (incomprehensible) *cards, tablets or what turned out to be the most important thing for us, individual support to students."*

Conclusion

Types of educational inequalities and vulnerable groups of students

Speaking about the types of educational inequalities, the focus group participants mentioned inequalities related to the characteristics of students and their families, and inequalities resulting from structural problems at the system level, local education authorities or educational institutions.

When it comes to the characteristics of students and their families, the participants primarily singled out poverty and inequalities related to family socioeconomic status as a very strong cause of educational inequalities that shape educational conditions and quality of life of students. Participants argued that the differences among students have been particularly prominent with distance learning, when problems such as disproportionate internet access and the availability of adequate electronic equipment to attend online classes further exacerbated existing educational inequalities.

In addition to students from socioeconomically deprived families, our participants also distinguished students with disabilities, students from dysfunctional families and victims of

neglect or abuse, members of the Roma minority, migrant students, members of the LGBTIQ + community, students with mental disabilities, and underage mothers as vulnerable groups in secondary education.

Institutional challenges: characteristics of the education system and general structural factors contributing to educational inequalities

As general structural factors contributing to educational inequalities, participants highlighted differences in the availability of free textbooks, transportation and food for all students, depending on the financial capabilities of the counties and cities where the schools are located.

From the point of view of the education system, one of the important causes of inequality is the uneven distribution of equipment available to schools. This is especially noticeable in vocational education, where adequate equipment is crucial in the implementation of vocational programmes. As a result, these differences affect the quality of education provided to students. Other reasons behind the differences in the quality of teaching are the lack of qualified teachers for certain subjects, which is especially pronounced in smaller communities, as well as the differences in school management, i.e. the way schools are run.

Discussing characteristics of the system that generate educational inequalities, participants pointed out to the lack of single shift schooling, insufficient or inadequate support for mental health and psychological well-being of students and teachers, or insufficient number of professionals (psychologists, pedagogues, social pedagogues) in schools, lack of systematic supervision as support for teachers, the unavailability of timely out of school psychological assistance for students in need (psychiatrists, therapists), and the inadequate level of cooperation with social care centres, attributed to insufficient capacity of these centres.

Measures for reducing educational inequalities

Discussing the possible reduction of inequalities in secondary education, participants presented on the one hand proposals to ensure the material prerequisites for education, and on the other hand proposals related to achieve a consistent level of quality of education.

Among the measures aimed at ensuring material preconditions, special emphasis has been placed on the importance of providing free textbooks, adequate nutrition and better organisation of transportation for students as factors that would contribute to creating equal educational opportunities for all secondary education students. The participants also proposed measures aimed at eliminating period poverty as an instrument to help empower a significant proportion of secondary education students. An important infrastructural and organisational change at the system level related to creating equal educational opportunities is the introduction of single shift schooling and all-day attendance in schools, which would, among other things, enable the performance of various support programmes for vulnerable groups of students in schools.

Another approach to reducing inequalities in secondary education is aimed at providing the same level of quality of education in all schools. A part of these measures focuses on the provision of qualified teaching to all students, stressing the need for changes in the system of professional development of teachers, for example through the reform of teacher education. Improving the quality of the evaluation and grading system, the recovery curriculum, and better implementation of cross-subject curriculum have also been proposed as possible systematic

measures that could help reduce educational inequalities. In addition to raising the quality of teaching itself, many participants identified strengthening of professional support in schools as extremely important, especially considering the increase in mental health problems among students, and the stress caused by the COVID-19 epidemic among students and teachers. Regarding professional services, the proposal was to introduce a sufficient number of pedagogues and psychologists in schools to provide support in maintaining the mental health of students, and to introduce a system of professional school counselling to better support students, especially students living in underprivileged circumstances who do not have enough information to make quality decisions on their choices in education. At the school level, participants proposed peer support models, some of which have already been implemented in certain schools and have proven to be useful, and stressed the importance of greater parental involvement.

Some of the measures to reduce educational inequalities that have been mentioned are already being implemented at the level of the education system and are targeted at specific underrepresented and vulnerable groups. This primarily refers to the provision of additional material resources such as scholarships for secondary education of students living in disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances, students with disabilities, and students belonging to the Roma minority. Students with disabilities are provided with support in terms of teaching assistants, as well as accessible transport, food and didactic equipment. The system of existing measures promotes the inclusion and retention of students of the Roma national minority in the education system, for example through the aforementioned provision of scholarships and dissemination of information on rights and benefits that students belonging to the Roma minority can enjoy in the education system. For commuting students, intercity transport is subsidised centrally for all secondary school students (with the unadjusted train schedule cited as a problem).

When it comes to proposing possible measures to reduce educational inequalities, it should be noted there were differences in opinion on their implementation: through visible public campaigns or through the "silent" work of experts. We do not believe that there is a straightforward answer to this question, but that the manner of implementation of certain measures should be considered on a case-by-case basis, bearing in mind the potential positive and negative consequences of different educational policies.

Implications of the findings

The findings established through interviews with decision-makers and relevant stakeholders in the field of secondary education indicate awareness of the range of aspects of educational inequalities and a relatively wide range of vulnerable groups of students within the secondary education system (e.g. students from disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions, students from dysfunctional families, students belonging to the Roma minority, LGBTIQ students, etc.). As a central mechanism for improving the status of these groups of students, participants proposed measures aimed at matching the material prerequisites and quality of teaching within the education system, regardless of any affiliation to vulnerable groups or secondary schools the students might attend. This attitude may indicate a certain understanding of equality within the education system, which equates equality in education primarily with equal access to education for all students. This understanding derives its plausibility in part from the assumption of a meritocratic character of the education system, whereby ensuring access to education and equal educational conditions (school equipment, quality of teaching) for all

students will result in educational success based largely on the merits and abilities of each individual student, regardless of their affiliation to a particular social (vulnerable or privileged) group. Without questioning the need to harmonise the quality of the teaching process, this view can be objected to for not sufficiently taking into account the fact that students begin and pursue their education from significantly different starting points (e.g. with regard to their social context, family or health situation) which can potentially limit their "real options" within the education system. In this sense, it is necessary to favour measures that can better respond to the specific needs of certain vulnerable groups of students by providing additional resources for individual help and support. In addition to the existing forms of material assistance for specific groups of students, other measures can also be highlighted. These include the introduction of single shift schooling and all-day attendance in schools (provided that the extra time spent in school is used for systematic work with students and for individual support) and better professional services both in schools and outside schools.

Considering these findings in the context of the work of the Croatian Lifelong Learning for All Network, it can be concluded that they represent a valuable source of information in planning for the following research studies of the project. The information collected on different types and sources of inequality in the Croatian educational context will be used to formulate research questions for the quantitative part of the project, which will study the perception of educational inequalities at certain levels of pre-tertiary education from the perspective of students, teachers and school management.

The findings of the focus group could also be used in planning the advocacy activities of the project, as it is evident that there are differences in awareness and perception of certain sources of educational inequalities among decision-makers and stakeholders at different levels of the system. Together with data from later research sections, these findings will help to design targeted advocacy activities aimed at specific groups of actors in the education system.

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3.1 HIGHER EDUCATION (FIRST FOCUS GROUP)

Iva Odak, Nikola Baketa, Branislava Baranović, Jelena Matić Bojić, Saša Puzić & Josip Šabić

Two separate higher education focus groups were conducted because this is the only level in Croatian education system that has a special body dedicated to educational inequalities, the National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education. The aim of the two focus groups was to identify any differences in views or level of information between the members of the National Group and other higher education stakeholders who were not directly engaged in the activities of the Group. We were interested in finding out how important stakeholders see educational inequalities in accessing, during and when completing higher education. Research on educational aspirations of secondary school pupils (Košutić, Puzić and Doolan, 2015; Odak, Puzić, 2019) highlighted the fact that secondary school pupils in Croatia have different aspirations towards the tertiary level – those pupils who wish to pursue higher education have more cultural, social and economic capital than the pupils who are still not certain about their choice, while the least cultural, social and economic capital is found among students who do not plan on pursuing higher education. Such differences only continue further at the level of higher education. According to Puzić, Doolan and Dolenec (2006), Ilišin (2008), Farnell et al. (2014) and Šćukanec et al. (2016), the student population has a higher socioeconomic status and a higher percentage of parents with higher education degrees than the average youth population in Croatia. At the European level, the social dimension of higher education has been in focus of educational policies (Sorbonne Declaration (1998), Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005), London (2007) and Leuven (2009) Communique, Budapest-Vienna Declaration (2010), Bucharest (2012) and Yerevan (2015) Communique). Therefore, one of the aims of the Strategy for Education, Science and Technology in Croatia (2014) is to improve the student standard with special emphasis on the social dimension of higher education. The Strategy states that the intention is to achieve "a broadly available higher education, which enables a more socially equitable system" (Strategy, 2014). In line with the Strategy, the National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education prepared the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia (National Plan, 2019). The National Plan lists 18 underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students[2]. The term "vulnerability" is defined as "increased risk of exposure to difficulties in the form of academic or social integration", or rather as "fewer opportunities for some aspects of studying such as international mobility" (National Plan, 2019). We were interested to find out how relevant higher education stakeholders view the problems of certain underrepresented and vulnerable social groups.

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[2] According to the National Plan (2019) these groups are: students whose parents have a lower level of education, students from lower-income families, female students in the technical field, male students in the humanities, mature students, students with children, students with disabilities, students who have completed vocational education, students who work while studying, students who commute to their place of study, students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans, students from the Roma minority, LGBT students, students from alternative care systems, homeless students and those at risk of becoming homeless, students from rural areas, small towns and islands, refugees and asylum seekers, part-time students and students of professional studies.

1. Perception of educational inequality in higher education

All focus group participants are of the opinion that there are educational inequalities in higher education in Croatia. The most frequently listed inequality is low economic status of students, followed by working students, students who live in rural areas and areas remote from university cities, gender inequality, including LGBTQ+ students, student parents and Roma students. Students with disabilities, migrant students, international students and mature students were also named. Some of the participants believe that most of the educational inequalities stem from the students' lower socioeconomic status, or in the words of one of the participants: "*it all boils down to the economic aspect really*", and another participant said the following about educational inequalities: "... *mostly it comes down to the socioeconomic status.*"

The importance of the socioeconomic dimension of educational inequalities is visible in the description of particular categories of educational inequalities, e.g. difficulties of students from rural or remote areas, student parents, Roma students and working students.

The focus group participants stated that, according to the rural-urban divide, students who lived in rural areas or smaller towns were not only less informed about study options, but they also encountered problems with paying rent and other costs of living outside of their parental home, which in turn either limited the possibility of accessing higher education or rendered it completely unavailable.

The low socioeconomic status of the Roma minority is another priority issue that higher education institutions are dealing with. Experience so far shows the importance of providing access to higher education for Roma:

> "*In our case, what we experienced is that, for example, those two Roma students are among the best students in their generation. So, there have been no differences in the sense of specific elements of Roma as a minority, it is all a matter of access and options that they surely could not afford, for example to pay 25,000 Kuna per year for tuition and make it through.*"

Socioeconomic difficulties present an obstacle in the case of private higher education institutions as well:

> "*It really is a major misconception that in private higher education institutions you find only people, that is, students, who have money or whose parents have money. At our faculty, above 85% of students pay their tuition fee in instalments. There are not that many students altogether, and we know that their parents are not wealthy and the students work extra jobs in order to pay for study costs.*"

The discussion also emphasised that the COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted inequalities in higher education, including those related to low socioeconomic status:

> " *... due to COVID, more and more full-time students had to take up jobs and it has been shown that without additional jobs many of them would not have been able to pursue their studies at all while some would have had a really rough time. .... COVID showed how many people experienced difficulties with, let's say, fundamental requirements for studying, the internet. So many students do not own a computer or have no internet connection. The inequality still boils down to the social dimension.*"

The problem of student parents was also mentioned in this context:

"*We encountered a new moment, student parents. We were not aware of how many there were at our faculty, so we came up with a project, did some research really – they usually never contact us, but have started to do so. The assistance they ask for – babysitting or additional financial assistance - there were many requests.*"

The discussion also included age as one of the causes of inequality in higher education. The issue of restricted access to and successful completion of higher education programmes for mature students was compared to the problems encountered by persons who work full-time and wish to pursue studies. In addition, this raised the issue of differentiating between full-time and part-time students:

"Another dimension is something that is, I'd dare say, partially linked with age discrimination, that on the other hand also reflects the weaknesses of the legal framework. It has to do with the fact that middle-aged or older persons are not integrated easily into education cycles because, on one hand, they cannot secure funding, or on the other, […], are not able to establish a solid financial framework that would enable them to leave their jobs in order to complete their studies."

The discussion also observed gender inequality. It is evident that higher education institutions have become more open towards the contemporary definitions and problems of gender inequality in education in a broader context:

"*... people abroad are perhaps somewhat more open to the new definitions of genders, inclusivity, underrepresented groups and give them more space to express themselves in some way... I don't know, there are specific projects intended for such groups of students to help them express themselves, and I wouldn't say I really observed anything similar developing in Croatia.*"

Among the more recent educational inequalities, the participants also included insufficient integration of international students, migrant students and asylum-seeker students into higher education. The participants are of the opinion that Croatia does not use the potentials of migrants and asylum seekers enough nor does it aim to integrate them into the education system. This is a problem that Croatia will be faced with in the future as well:

"*...we really haven't made use of the potential of migrants who are currently in Croatia or who were passing through Croatia. There is a chance that in the future we will be facing these problems again, so I think it is necessary to intervene in this to make sure the migrants are integrated into education cycles appropriately, […], there are different ways to carry out recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning and how to substitute these forms of education appropriately in order to respond to the job market.*"

2. Institutional factors that hinder/facilitate access to and success in higher education

The conversation in the focus group showed that, in tackling educational inequalities, higher education institutions face many difficulties that hinder students from accessing and successfully completing their studies. These difficulties are diverse and depend on the category of educational inequality. They emerge from the institutions themselves, from the legal and regulatory framework pertaining to higher education, from policy obstacles and from practices of other bodies and institutions related to higher education.

Among institutional factors, student administration was identified as contributing to student inequality in accessing services, especially for students who were on Erasmus or other exchange programmes.

> "*For example, COVID hinted at certain inequalities in accessing particular services for students, specifically student administration for students away on Erasmus or other exchange programmes that did not work efficiently and in that way during COVID perhaps additionally contributed to inequality and students weren't able to maintain the same study conditions.*"

The problem of working while studying is shown as one of the priorities in achieving educational equality in higher education. The discussion made it clear that higher education institutions face difficulties in tackling this issue, which emerges from the structure of study programmes and from an inadequate legal framework:

> "*... there are, and we're talking about lifelong learning here, potential students who work, who wish to study and pursue further specialisation. Not only in their profession but they wish to study something completely different. However, I don't know how to approach this in the sense of finding an appropriate legal solution which would enable them to study and work. And here I'm not referring to part-time studies, whose structure enables this combination. We have a range of study programmes that just don't allow for this.*"

One of the factors that has a negative impact on resolving the issue of working while studying is the current practice of other institutions, in this case the Administrative Court:

> "*....as far as I can see from the documents, there really is no mention of this problem of differentiating full-time and part-time students in regard to employment. This explicit prohibition to work, to be a full-time student while fully employed does not emerge from higher education regulations, it is the outcome of the administrative courts' practices who, due to some confusion about tax relief, administered penalty fees to people who worked while studying full-time. This is surely something that, in my opinion, would make a valuable conclusion in this focus group, as a foundation of sorts, because at the moment changes are being made to the act[s] serving as the basis for the Student Employment Act and all other regulations.*"

The discussion also included difficulties in equal access to PhD programmes. Current university regulations were mentioned that hinder direct enrolment in PhD programmes for students from polytechnics or university colleges:

> "*Students of professional study programmes have no direct access to PhD programmes in Croatia… With all due respect to the autonomy of the university and the option in the current regulations that they can control who they will accept to the particular levels of education they conduct, I find it ridiculous that, for example, a student from a professional study programme at a polytechnic or university college enrols in PhD or similar programmes in Maribor, Ljubljana, Italy without any difficulties, and they cannot do that in Croatia without, I don't know, like ten additional entry exams, which is no motivation whatsoever for these students to even consider accessing this educational level.*"

In achieving gender equality at higher education institutions, they face difficulties in implementing newer approaches, that is the new concept of gender which includes LGBTQ+ students. Accepting these students turned out to be a problematic area:

> "*We saw it was necessary to attract students* [for Erasmus mobility] *who we obviously had not reached. And so here we used the opportunity, together with the Ministry of Science ... to expand the list* [for Erasmus+ grants] *and offer higher education institutions that they ... see who to choose and not to choose in the groups... One university initiated that list and then a major problem arose regarding LGBT students on that list. Students who do not belong to that group objected the list, students who do belong to the group objected it as well, local politicians also made comments. The university removed the group, which of course is their right because every institution selects on their own which categories to include, but this turned out to be like dominoes, as far as we gathered from talking with these institutions, it affected others as well and they all more or less removed the category from the list.*"

Along with the COVID-19 pandemic, the earthquakes that hit Croatia in 2020 additionally contributed to the difficulties that higher education institutions were facing in achieving educational equality. According to the focus group participants, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the earthquakes opened the question of adequate implementation of the State Matura Exam and equal access to higher education for students from the affected areas:

> "*....when accessing higher education, there is definitely inequality. We have also mentioned how the State Matura Exam took place, there are certain problems here, some schools currently do not have any options available for adequate Matura Exam procedure considering the earthquakes and the pandemic.*"

3. Current practices of stakeholders for reducing educational inequality in higher education

The focus group participants were asked about what their institutions were currently doing to reduce or remove educational inequality. A participant from a national-level institution highlighted broadening the term of the 'social dimension of higher education', which had led to measures being available and implemented for a larger number of students. Broadening the term contributed to reducing educational inequality for different groups who previously had not had the opportunity to receive additional funding:

> "*So, for the 2020 call we broadened the term, on the basis of the work conducted by the National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education. Until then, we had really only observed students with reduced opportunities as those with lower socioeconomic status. Thanks to the list, containing 17, 18 terms, we expanded it and what we then saw was a steep rise in numbers of students applying for Erasmus+.*"

Most of the measures developed for reducing educational inequality in higher education that were highlighted by the focus group participants from higher education institutions can be classified into two groups – material and non-material. Material measures include various types of funding, one-off financial assistance, flexibility in paying tuition, reduced tuition or full tuition waiver. In relation to non-material measures, most of the participants primarily pointed at student counselling services that assist students in a range of issues (psychological, legal,

career-related). Aside from counselling services, several participants highlighted specific measures implemented at some institutions that are geared towards reducing educational inequality. These comprise adapting admission exams, suspending studies, adapting study materials, recording lectures and, at smaller institutions, individual approach to resolve the specific challenges the students face.

The individual approach mostly refers to students with disabilities who are offered a range of support measures at various higher education institutions (technical assistance, peer assistance, institutional assistance) to enable them to participate in study programmes and fulfil programme requirements.

> "*It was impossible to install elevators in five buildings due to financial restrictions, so we created various ways of helping those with reduced mobility or who had to be carried by using wheelchair caterpillar tracks.*"

At some higher education institutions, additional focus is placed on students coming from secondary vocational schools. What was particularly highlighted was the promotion of study programmes among this population of secondary school pupils through providing information in vocational schools.

> "*in general, encouraging pupils who complete vocational secondary schools to pursue higher education because I think we are not clear at the level of policies whether we want to stimulate equality – but the question is whether we should encourage them to pursue higher education or is it more important for us that there really is a huge lack of people with vocational education in our country.*"

Measures aimed at encouraging members of the Roma minority to access higher education were highlighted twice. One higher education institution introduced quotas for these students at their own initiative and another higher education institution, a private one, waivered their tuition. Both institutions highlighted these measures as their own initiatives and not something they had been bound to implement. They recognised the significance of this and acted accordingly, so as to contribute to reducing the inequality they had detected.

> "… *as a private higher education institution that has no obligation whatsoever to do this, last year we introduced the practice of accepting two students, regardless of gender, of the Roma minority to enrol in study programmes at our school with full tuition waiver.*"

It is also possible to single out measures for students who study and work. One of the participants pointed out that recording lectures enables students to listen to the lecture within a given time frame and adjusting schedules would also prove helpful for this group of students.

Monitoring and evaluating these measures is two-fold. On one hand, some of the participants emphasise monitoring via quality control which comprises the entire operation of a higher education institution. According to the participants, this means collecting various statistics and feedback on different aspects, but it was not fully clarified whether some sort of evaluation exists or the whole thing remains at the level of collecting information:

> "*Evaluating the efficiency of these measures, I can't say really, we have some, we do have a system of evaluating the implementation of all our activities through the quality control system. These evaluations are performed annually, but we don't have*

something specific, that is specifically directed at these particular measures, at checking the efficiency of these measures."

"*… there are evaluation options, of course when referring to certain conditions for the universities that pay attention to this. They must file their annual report.*"

"*Evaluation is conducted through the various reports we prepare, and we also carry out the student satisfaction index model in which they evaluate us, our services so to say, cooperation with us, what we can ensure for them additionally, what they need, what they aren't satisfied with.*"

Another form of monitoring and evaluation refers to students directly commenting on the measures. Some of the participants mentioned implementing focus groups with students to gain more detailed insight and making available anonymous communication through the national agency:

"*… we conducted separate focus groups with each study programme and talked […] with over 60% of the total number of students enrolled at the institution, so we gained really great insight, really good overview of what we do and how we do it.*"

4. Opportunities for reducing educational inequality in higher education

Most of the participants emphasised that, in the future, many of the practices that have already been undertaken with the aim of reducing educational inequality in higher education should be maintained and further developed. Special emphasis is placed on further work necessary to raise awareness about these issues among a broader range of stakeholders. One of the participants stated that some measures aimed at reducing educational inequality that had already been implemented will be even more demanded in the future, considering the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic:

"*I have to say that many things have been implemented so far, at least I have observed changes, at our university as well, and I see them at the national level, so these measures should continue. To continue education and to disseminate information through various other structures in order to raise awareness about this topic and enhance the entire system of higher education, so to speak. To work further on inclusion, removing barriers, establishing equal conditions for higher education for all.*"

According to the participants, strong emphasis should be placed in the future on inter-institutional cooperation and harmonising regulations necessary for resolving educational inequality in higher education. One of the participants stressed the necessity for inter-institutional coordination of opportunities aimed at removing or reducing educational inequality in higher education, as the practices and levels of quality of the support are not the same across institutions.

Some of the participants think that, in the coming period, additional efforts should be made to reduce educational inequality for specific subgroups within the student body that had not been in focus earlier. This is specifically aimed at migrant students and pupils who completed vocational secondary school. In addition, challenges were discussed that are specific for individual vulnerable groups, e.g. recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning for migrant students.

One of the participants commented on educational inequality in higher education considering the depopulation trend in Croatia, emphasising that in the future students will be the resources that higher education institutions will compete for.

"And another thing, I think that when the people who run these higher education institutions, regardless whether it's universities, polytechnics, colleges, private, state, completely irrelevant, when they finally understand where we are at, when they finally see and comprehend the depopulation trend in Croatia, they will then understand that they'll have to fight for each and every student, not that the students will come to them and then be treated as just another number and they will think if this one won't another guy will. This will in turn lead to what my colleague has just stated that the focus will turn to the student, not only in the study programme, but in the whole system. Because if the student will not want to study at a particular institution, there won't be another student who will fill their place."

Financial support as a precondition to implementing measures of reducing educational inequality in higher education is sporadically mentioned in the replies from the participants, but financial resources are not presented as a substantial obstacle to achieving this goal. As an important precondition for reducing educational inequality, one of the participants stated that it is necessary to invest in academic staff and raise awareness among them about the social dimension of higher education:

"In terms of financing we do have many EU funding schemes available currently and in the forthcoming period, that's good. As one of those new topics, the novelties we're introducing, we secured some funds for digitalisation, higher education institutions will be able to purchase laptops and similar equipment for their students. And what seems to me as a really important point is to invest in teachers' competencies, the motivation of your own academic staff, to work on these topics because we are all well aware of overburdened staff and when your choice is between working on improving your courses or publishing a research paper, then it's pretty obvious which option is of more benefit to the person."

Conclusion

The focus group participants were well acquainted with the notion of educational inequality and current state-of-the-art at the level of the entire system and individual institutions. The most frequently mentioned inequality was low socioeconomic status of students, followed by working students, students who live in rural areas or places remote from university cities, gender inequality, including LGBTQ+ students, student parents, Roma students, students with disabilities and mature students. Regarding gender-based differences, they were well-informed about higher education institutions becoming more open to the current definitions and problems of gender inequality in education. Among the more recent educational inequalities, insufficient integration of international students, migrant students and asylum-seeker students into higher education was mentioned. The participants think that Croatia is not using the potential of migrants and asylum-seekers nor does it attempt to integrate them into the education system. In addition, the discussion emphasised the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on maintaining and even increasing inequality in higher education.

The participants listed various institutional factors that hinder accessing and completing study programmes, depending on the category of educational inequality. Some difficulties in

accessing programmes and studying arise from the institutions themselves, while some arise from the legal and normative framework pertaining to higher education, from policy obstacles and from practices of other bodies and institutions related to higher education. Aside from the COVID-19 pandemic, the earthquakes that hit some parts of the country in 2020 additionally contributed to the difficulties that higher education institutions were facing in achieving educational equality.

The participants cited various measures for reducing or removing educational inequality that are being implemented at higher education institutions. There are two main groups of these measures - material and non-material. However, selecting which specific measures to implement depends on the context of the institutions – represented groups, students' needs declared, legal status of the institution, whether the institution is private- or state-owned, etc. According to the experiences that the participants shared in the focus group, it could be said that the current measures are often not accompanied by adequate mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation. General data is collected, but the participants did not state which concrete steps were taken after data collection, namely how particular measures were improved or dismissed or how new ones were introduced.

The recommendations that the participants highlighted as opportunities for removing or reducing educational inequality refer to complying with or strengthening current measures and suggesting new ones. What was also emphasised is a necessity for integrating measures and stronger cooperation among institutions, for further harmonising formal regulations necessary to resolve problems of educational inequality in higher education and for coordinating measures across higher education institutions. The participants acknowledged different underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students. Some of the participants think that in the coming period additional efforts should be made regarding the measures to reduce educational inequality for specific subgroups within the student body that had not been in focus earlier (migrant students and pupils who finished vocational secondary school). In line with other elements in the discussion, while considering possible measures for removing or reducing educational inequality in higher education, the participants highlighted the challenges brought about by the pandemic and strongly stressed that it is necessary to raise awareness of the social dimension of higher education.

3.2 HIGHER EDUCATION (SECOND FOCUS GROUP)

Iva Odak, Nikola Baketa, Branislava Baranović, Jelena Matić Bojić, Saša Puzić
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The aim of the second focus group in the field of higher education was to determine how other decision-makers and relevant stakeholders in higher education perceive educational inequalities and the possibilities for mitigating or eliminating them. The method of purposive sampling was used in selecting participants for the research. The selected participants, as assessed by the research team members, represented a sample of "key informants" about educational inequalities in higher education.

The research involved a total of 8 representatives from higher education institutions and the relevant ministry, as well as student representatives from the following institutions:

- University of Rijeka
- University of Zadar
- Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences in Zagreb
- Faculty of Organisation and Informatics in Varaždin
- Croatian Student Union
- Ministry of Science and Education

Participants in the focus group responded to the following research questions:

- How do decision-makers/stakeholders in the field of higher education perceive educational inequalities in the Republic of Croatia?
- What are the current practices of decision-makers/stakeholders and their institutions for reducing educational inequalities in higher education?
- How do decision-makers/stakeholders in the field of higher education see the possibilities for mitigating/eliminating educational inequalities in the Republic of Croatia?

The report follows the structure of the research questions. Further details about the research methodology can be found in Appendix I of this publication.

1. Perception of educational inequality in higher education

All focus group participants are of the opinion that there are educational inequalities in higher education in Croatia. Multiple vulnerable and underrepresented groups were identified: students with disabilities, students with low socioeconomic status, working part-time students, students from different gender groups, students from geographically isolated areas, student children of Croatian war veterans, migrant students and asylum-seeker students, students from the alternative care system and PhD students.

A large portion of the focus group participants spoke about students with disabilities. Although students with disabilities still constitute an underrepresented group in higher education, it was emphasised in the discussion that most of the efforts aimed at including underrepresented students in higher education were achieved for this group:

> "...So, regarding students with disabilities. I'd just like to comment on this, they're a vulnerable group that we in a way did most for, went the furthest, made the most

adjustments. I mean, we've heard it here as well, … I would like to point out though that for them the opportunities are rather equal, a lot has been done in higher education… The problem is in the pre-tertiary. I would say that inequality really means not to have equal access, it refers to not being equally prepared to continue one's education."

Working full-time students were identified as a vulnerable group of students who encounter problems in accessing higher education and during their studies:

"*I'd perhaps highlight two groups of students who face quite a number of issues in accessing higher education or within higher education. The first group consists of full-time students who have to work through the student employment office, ... to support their living costs. To pay for accommodation, to pay for everyday needs, and very often to even support their families. And what happens here then – what happens is that they need that work in order to study. The bare fact that they're working impacts their studies, they cannot manage study requirements on time, very often, which leads to insufficient final ECTS score, they fail the semester or something and this in turn means they must pay tuition fees. This all means they need to work even more and it all becomes a vicious circle and problems often emerge.*"

The situation is rather similar for part-time students as well, i.e. students who are working full-time while studying:

"*The other group is made up of students who work full time and are part-time students. There are some major problems here. Courses are not at all adapted to part-time students with full-time jobs, and very often they either take courses with full-time students or they're just given assignments which they should fulfil on their own at home without ever being in class at all. So, this has been common practice also.*"

Regarding gender inequality in higher education, inequalities were mentioned in relation to study choices that are not seen as typical to the student's gender:

"*...I wouldn't want to leave out this part of gender equality, because I know how difficult it is for our female students to enter these, let's call it, typically male professions, that is the ICT. However, I would mention here that there has been a slight shift towards the better, towards equality. Also, of course, there are faculties that are, let's say, predominantly female, and I know that male colleagues say it's difficult for them in pre-school education, the area which is, let's say, typically represented as a female profession.*"

Together with gender inequality in higher education, additional remarks were made about inequality based on sexual orientation, which is still scarcely mentioned as a topic in general:

"*This is still taboo and it would be useful to mention this topic.*"

The discussion showed that geographic location can be seen as an important cause of inequality in higher education, which bears negative consequences for the larger community as well, e.g. youth emigration. In this context, rural areas, islands and small towns were mentioned:

> "*At the level of counties ... it has been noticed that where there is no higher education option, or some type of continuation of education, that it's ... related to youth leaving the area, sort of a brain drain.... Of course, we can't say that certain settings and geographic locations do not have impact. Oh, there are.... Here I'm referring to the islands and coastal areas that gravitate to the University of Split.*"

> "*...Because, for sure, accessing higher education is connected with the location, near the university. So, if in your district or city, or town, there is a higher education institution, it's somehow natural that students and prospective students would gravitate to that particular institution. Of course, islands … but I definitely think it's those areas remote from the big cities. So, those away from the centre – islands, Zagora, and similar.*"

The discussion introduced inequality at the level of PhD programmes. Underrepresentation at this educational level is connected to the students' lower socioeconomic status, more precisely, they cannot afford tuition:

> "*The problem is obvious. PhD tuition is mandatory unless you're working as an assistant at a faculty. It's pretty clear what the problem is for everyone else. E.g. I know a guy who was working as a waiter for over eight hours per day so he could afford his PhD tuition. … I mean, the problem is simple, but runs deep, it presents a financial burden for everyone outside of the higher education institutions.*"

Migrant students and asylum-seeker students were also identified as vulnerable groups. According to the focus group participants, one of the reasons for the inequality of migrant students and asylum-seeker students is the lack of recognition of their qualifications and previous education:

> "*For example, with asylum seekers, definitely the lack of recognition of previous education and international higher education qualifications presents an obstacle to faster inclusion.*"

According to the focus group participants, the COVID-19 pandemic additionally contributed to the inequalities across higher education, especially for students with lower socioeconomic status:

> "*What's important, I think we need to talk about the pandemic that has had a negative impact on some types of inequality, especially now with online classes.. inequalities that posed problems for some students... E.g. lack of equipment – again it was the socioeconomic status that emerged as the problem first.*"

The participants stated that the pandemic had negative consequences for the mental health of students:

> "*We don't really think about our students' mental health which is different at this moment and different in a negative sense in relation to what it was like before the pandemic.*"

> "*on the other hand it* [transition to online classes] *brought about a new vulnerable group, and that is, because it has been shown that in the long run students are less motivated to follow online courses and the drop-out rate will rise, so we should pay a lot of attention to socialisation, to mental, psychological problems of regular, full-time students… we did not face such problems prior to this.*"

Aside from the pandemic, the participants considered the earthquakes that hit Croatia in 2020 as an additional negative impact on the students, especially those with lower socioeconomic status:

> "*The other thing that has become very clear to us – the area affected by the earthquake – the students often contacted us to tell us they were dropping out because they were leaving with their families, moving away because their family could not sustain any standard of living any longer. So, Sisak and that whole area was particularly problematic, and of course, this also refers to having no internet access and other issues, tuition options, and everything else we've talked about.*"

2. Institutional factors that hinder/facilitate access to and success in higher education

According to the focus group participants, institutions are facing difficulties at the institutional and systemic level in achieving equality in access, retention and completion of higher education programmes. These difficulties are found among students with disabilities as well, and the inclusion of this group has been the most developed so far, as stated by the focus group participants.

The participants believe that one of the problems at the systemic level can be found in obtaining relevant and reliable data about vulnerable groups which are very heterogenous and susceptible to change. This problem is further increased by the difficulties caused by the pandemic:

> "*...the data, as the professor stated, is a live being, a heterogenous body in constant change. This data is variable. It is hard to collect relevant and reliable data which we find important – to have data collections, to detect early who the vulnerable groups are in order to act on time for future students as well.*"

Among the problems at the systemic level the participants highlighted unclear regulations:

> "*...I just wanted to let you know that no matter the decisions you make, the National Group and everything, you will influence our regulations, and as these are not clearly outlined, it is difficult for us to implement them.*"

The issue with regulations is especially complicated when it comes to students with disabilities:

> "*... so here, to be completely honest, sometimes I really am happy that some areas are not regulated. Because then we can really take an individual approach, as it is the only, let's call it, just way of doing things. Because we know it ourselves that it is a highly heterogenous population, if we just look at "mine", so that's students with disabilities, they differ so much among each other and I have to admit that, just like XX, I'm not happy with these solutions* [in current regulations]."

Another significant problem, according to the participants, can be found in the criteria set up for assessing students with disabilities. These are problematic because they do not acknowledge status to some of the students, so the institutions cannot provide adequate assistance:

> "*I know, it's clear to me that the line was at 60 per cent and more for physical impairment. This year it has changed due to changes in various other regulations. However, the problem is that for us it leaves out a number of students who do have*

severe difficulties, but do not have concrete physical impairment. This means they cannot receive funding – i.e. students with specific learning difficulties, dyslexia for example or something else. This definitely presents a huge obstacle in their successful education, and they receive no support there."

In supporting students with disabilities higher education institutions face the problem of determining and drawing clear boundaries between the responsibilities of the higher education institutions and other structures that support students with disabilities.

"*I understand how complex this problem is, but in my opinion, it is not a matter for higher education, but for other systems, e.g. the social care system and similar.*"

Difficulties connected with the concept of part-time studies were also mentioned in the discussion. Neither the definition nor the purpose of this concept was transparent enough. This is a very important topic because the lack of a clear concept prompts the question of how higher education institutions can provide the flexibility necessary for part-time students to complete their studies while working a full-time job:

"*This means that our problem is…, what is it really, this system of part-time studies, and what is its purpose. In theory, in principle, it was designed to provide additional flexibility to students with full-time jobs. However, we all know very well what the reality turned out like, often it was a way for students who didn't manage to enrol in full-time programmes, they'd enrol in part-time programmes, and that was not the goal of this system at all. In a way it's like, to some extent, going back to that old system of enrolment with and without tuition.*"

Regarding difficulties at the level of higher education institutions, it was mentioned that teachers were not prepared to work with vulnerable groups, which includes problems with their additional training:

"*However, there are no mechanisms available to make the teachers join the education. You know, the usual happens, those who are already aware of the issue, who already know a lot, they register for the training. And those, I'll be mean here, those who should be brought in by force, there is no mechanism available to bring them in by force, so unfortunately there's a big discrepancy in that support, as some are ready to do a lot, and some don't care at all, and we don't have a way to make them do anything. This should be directed from the university level.*"

3. Current practices of stakeholders for reducing educational inequality in higher education

One participant from a national-level institution emphasised that it was primarily the broadening of the definition of underrepresented and vulnerable groups that enabled them to reach a larger number of students. In her words, this was accompanied by documents and publications. It was also stated that the Ministry conducted a project about the social dimension of higher education which resulted in a whole set of documents and publications as support or framework for future actions.

Most of the current measures for reducing educational inequality in higher education that were highlighted by the focus group participants from higher education institutions can be classified into two groups – material and non-material. Material measures include various types of

funding, one-off assistance, flexibility in paying tuition, possible reduction of the fee or full waiver. In relation to non-material measures, most of the participants primarily pointed to student counselling services that assist students in a range of issues (psychological, legal, career-related).

The participants said that these measures are usually directed towards specific individual groups. Material support is directed to students with lower socioeconomic status, but includes other vulnerable groups as well, so as to encompass a broader range of educational inequality:

> "*So, the socioeconomic financial assistance includes, that is additional points are given to children of Croatian war veterans, but also children from the alternative and social care. Children without one or both parents, additional points are given for siblings in the regular education system. Students with disabilities, I think that's it.*"

Specific measures aimed at working students were pinpointed as well. One of the participants highlighted the importance of providing exam schedules in advance, so that working students know the dates of the exams at the beginning of the academic year.

At some higher education institutions, additional focus is placed on students coming from secondary vocational schools. One of the participants mentioned preparatory courses for these students to facilitate adaptation and studying.

Regarding monitoring and evaluation of existing measures, one of the participants highlighted that the trends should be observed and that regular student surveys should be conducted. Another participant emphasised that students should be included in committees at higher education institutions that could serve as a platform for expressing their opinion about the measures implemented for reducing educational inequality in higher education. The same participant also mentioned organising meetings with students with disabilities:

> "*The only thing we have in the sense of measuring, and this is more like observing a trend rather than observing influence or impact, is reporting on the measures from the Strategy... And recently we have in the analysis of students' satisfaction […] these are the standardised surveys for all students at the university at the end of their studies.*"

> "*Twice a year minimum we meet up for joint sessions, so with students with disabilities, where they in a way assess the support system, show where the problems are and on the basis of that we map out activities.*"

4. Opportunities for reducing educational inequality in higher education

While discussing the opportunities for reducing or removing educational inequality, the participants identified several key obstacles. The first obstacle is the lack of reliable data and a sound analytical basis. One participant stated, and some of the others agreed, that it is difficult to implement activities in a meaningful and efficient way if no sound analytical basis exists at the university and national level. The idea is that the data should be integrated into ISVU [Information system of higher education institutions] to conduct reliable learning analytics, e.g. follow the students' learning pathways and outcomes depending on their vulnerability factor. According to the participants, such a sound basis would help identify students from vulnerable groups and would be useful in educating and persuading those who are not aware of educational inequality. One of the participants informed us that within the project *Sideral* a document had been prepared with the methodology for observing the learning

paths of students according to their social and economic statuses and that a new policy is being developed on maintaining records in higher education.

Several participants noted that a significant obstacle in reducing educational inequality in higher education is the fact that inequality develops at an earlier stage, often before primary school. The participants stated that it is impossible to efficiently tackle inequality only at the level of higher education. In this sense, it is important to provide training for educational experts from all levels on how to work with members of vulnerable groups. One participant informed us at the session that the National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education included the Education Department from the Ministry of Science and Education, with the aim of identifying individuals from vulnerable groups and addressing educational inequality during pre-tertiary education:

> "*Absolutely, the entire vertical structure of the education system must participate in this. Otherwise, most of the work will be pointless.*"

One participant also added that it was important to raise awareness about the obstacles that mature students are facing, that is the barriers for lifelong learning. She believes it is important to carry out campaigns to reach larger numbers of senior citizens who also have the right to access higher education, acquire qualifications, upskill, etc.

Another topic that was extensively discussed were the obstacles encountered by part-time students. One participant stated that part-time programmes had been designed to provide additional flexibility to students with full-time jobs. In reality, there is often little flexibility and part-time students take courses with full-time students, or rather they are adapting to the study programme and the teachers, and not the other way round. The participant believes that, contrary to the practice so far, part-time students should be seen as students who may even, to some degree, have more rights than full-time students. In his opinion, removing obstacles for part-time students is substantial in order to avoid perpetuating inequality that some in this particular student body have been facing since childhood:

> "*Why is this, in my opinion, so extremely important for the whole story? Because I believe that the Eurostudent survey showed us how it's really that among part-time students that we find so many situations with members of vulnerable groups, and then the whole story with replicating inequality from earlier stages of education, where someone maybe scores lower at these earlier stages because of the vulnerability factor. So then that person accesses higher education, cannot enrol as a full-time student, enrols as a part-time student, must pay for their tuition, and so in this way we only further accumulate vulnerability onto the people who are already vulnerable to begin with.*"

The participants extensively discussed the advantages and disadvantages of the so-called digital transition that the system was forced to perform due to the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant initiated the discussion on the so-called hybrid models for the future, which could facilitate studying for one part of the student body – for students with disabilities this would mean facilitating everyday challenges such as accessing the faculty, transport, etc. or for working students this means using course recordings they could access when it fits their schedule. In this sense, ICT was seen as an option that may assist in overcoming obstacles for vulnerable groups during studies. Nevertheless, more participants pushed forward the argument that the digital setting was a problem for students with lower socioeconomic status,

who had no equipment, conditions, internet connection, etc. Aside from this, studying online brought about a new vulnerable group – students who had issues with motivation, anxiety, depression, etc. due to social isolation. In the context of studying online, it was stated that for some students it was difficult to contribute to their studies if they were immersed again into poor housing conditions or inadequate relationships in the family, which they were removed from while studying at the faculty because they were living in rented apartments or student dormitories:

> "*I'd like to briefly talk about online classes and say that we should be very careful about this topic, especially considering students with disabilities who are often excluded due to their impairments, something we mustn't forget, this social aspect of higher education. And I really wouldn't want it that this option becomes our alibi for not acting on it, that we don't need to adjust. (…) I'm against it in principle, maybe it can serve as a temporary solution for some students in specific situations.*"

We encouraged the participants to think about the measures that would help address educational inequality in higher education. One of the suggestions was that all higher education institutions introduced an option for part-time students to register for as many ECTS as they could manage (take up limited study load) in given circumstances. In that way, part-time students would probably have to extend their study, but they could study at their own pace, which could potentially reduce the number of students who cannot meet the requirements and are in that way excluded from higher education.

One of the possible measures to remove or reduce educational inequality in higher education which does not require long-term planning or investments is providing regulations at the level of institutions about students from vulnerable groups. More accurately, one of the participants stated that not all higher education institutions have internal policies about studying for students with disabilities, but this could change relatively quickly, if the administration supported it. Furthermore, it was mentioned that it is important to raise awareness about recognising previous education – preparing internal institutional policies for this procedure should be encouraged. One participant warned that short-term measures are often very intense in the sense of funding usually, illustrating this with financial support for PhD students who are not employed at higher education or research institutions and employing people specialised in working with vulnerable groups in higher education:

> "*In Croatia it seems that where we have it, we have offices for students with disabilities, for the simple reason that, not always, but most often physical impairment is clearly visible and people have become sensitised about it, but not other possible types of vulnerability. OK, so I diverted again towards a more long-term thing, but regardless, short-term measures means, and this calls for investing funds, we don't just need an office for students with disabilities, we need experts, professionals, who work with vulnerable groups at higher education institutions. And then these experts, once it's their workplace, when they think about the matter continuously, that person can become the driving force behind very practical changes on a fundamental level.*"

Finally, one participant emphasised that planning any measures or initiatives aimed at students must include students themselves and asking them what they need, or what is lacking.

Conclusion

All focus group participants stated that there is educational inequality in higher education in Croatia and that further efforts should be made on reducing and removing it. The participants identified multiple underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students: students with disabilities, students with low socioeconomic status, working part-time students, students from different gender groups, students from geographically isolated areas, student children of Croatian veterans, migrant students and asylum-seeker students, students from the alternative care system and PhD students. A large portion of the focus group participants spoke about students with disabilities. It was emphasised that for this group of students much had been developed already, but still not enough to make them equal in opportunities with other students. An interesting finding was the identification of PhD students as a vulnerable group, or rather the attention directed towards educational inequality at the level of PhD programmes, which had not been a topic in relevant references so far or in documents related to the social dimension of education in Croatia.

The participants highlighted current measures for reducing or removing educational inequality in higher education that were being implemented at their institutions. The participants cited two basic groups of these measures – material and non-material measures. Material measures refer to financial investments into funding for students or investing into institutional infrastructure which could influence the reduction of educational inequality. In regard to non-material measures, the most frequently discussed items were documents, publications and legal measures aimed at reducing educational inequality. Another non-material measure that was discussed was student counselling (psychological, legal, career-related), which turned out to be essential for all groups of students in the times of the pandemic and the earthquakes, not just for the underrepresented and vulnerable. Regarding monitoring and evaluation, the existing measures for reducing and removing educational inequality are still not developed enough or are not systematically and continually implemented, as stated by the participants.

During the conversation on the opportunities of reducing or removing educational inequality, the participants identified several main obstacles. The significant obstacle is the lack of reliable data and a sound analytical basis for decision-making, along with the fact that inequality emerges much earlier, often before primary school. The participants stated that it is impossible to efficiently tackle inequality only at the level of higher education. In spite of this, possible measures were highlighted – providing training for all professional support staff on how to work with members of vulnerable groups, raising awareness about the obstacles that mature students are facing, that is the barriers for lifelong learning, offering ICT as the option to try and overcome the obstacles for some vulnerable groups during studies, developing institutional policies about studying for students from vulnerable groups, which have not been developed on all higher education institutions. Some of the participants also pointed out the importance of recognition of prior qualifications as well as developing internal documents at higher education institutions with this exact aim. They also mentioned the importance of financial support for PhD students. The participants stated that students must be included in planning measures and initiatives aimed at students.

The focus group participants were in general well informed about the issues of educational inequality in higher education and the existing measures for reducing or removing inequality. The participants warned about the complex nature of these issues, putting forward the necessity of systematic solutions for educational inequality at earlier levels of education and

the recent changes and opportunities in using ICT due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In regard to the current classification of underrepresented and vulnerable groups in higher education, the participants pointed towards another category of vulnerable students – PhD students. All participants agreed that the activities should be conducted at the levels of the system, the institution and the individual, so as to further reduce or remove educational inequality in higher education as well as other levels of education in Croatia.

Synthesis of both focus groups

Both focus groups participants were well informed about the issues of educational inequalities and the current measures for reducing or removing these inequalities. Regarding the potential differences in views or level of information between the members of the two focus groups, it can be said that there were no significant differences between the groups, but many similar observations were made and concerns addressed. It was interesting to find how the participants who had not been engaged in the activities of the National Group identified a new category of vulnerable students – PhD students, while the participants from the National Group were referring to the existing and well-defined underrepresented and vulnerable groups. Furthermore, participants not engaged with the National Group highlighted potential obstacles in reducing or removing educational inequality – the lack of reliable data and a sound analytical basis for decision-making, along with the fact that inequality emerges much earlier, often before primary school. The participants in this focus group stated that it was impossible to efficiently tackle inequality only at the level of higher education. Both focus groups highlighted several other important points. The earthquakes that hit Croatia in 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic further contributed to higher education inequalities, but ICT has the potential to offer opportunities for enhancing the social dimension of higher education. Participants from both focus groups stated that monitoring and evaluation of the current measures for reducing and removing educational inequalities was scarce. Their comments suggested that the current measures were still not developed enough or implemented systematically. Both focus groups participants emphasised the complex nature of these issues, calling for the necessary systematic solutions for educational inequalities.

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4. ADULT EDUCATION

Tihomir Žiljak & Teo Matković

Educational inequality in adult education is a phenomenon that andragogy has been investigating since its beginnings (Pastuović, Žiljak, 2018). One of the reasons for developing a traditional emancipatory approach in adult education can be found in providing a second chance for socially excluded, poor, uneducated and neglected citizens to access education. In the search for equal educational opportunities the most frequent approach is to remove barriers that lead to educational inequality (Petterson, 2018). These are situational barriers (those that emerge from a person's living situation), institutional barriers (practices and actions that hinder participation) and dispositional barriers (negative attitudes and lack of motivation for inclusion in education) (UNESCO, 2019). These three sets of barriers are interconnected and impact each other. Institutional adjustments may facilitate overcoming the dispositional barriers. Adequate financial support for vulnerable groups is also important in reducing institutional and situational barriers. The opportunity to gain work experience may influence all three categories of barriers. Ensuring the availability of a wider range of programmes may help in reducing situational and dispositional barriers.

On the basis of research conducted so far, a number of groups with less access to adult education programmes were identified: people with disabilities, ethnic, national and religious minorities, people living in rural areas, migrants, asylum seekers, persons under subsidiary protection, older adults, people with lower levels of education and people who are not employed and do not participate in educational programmes (UNESCO, 2019).

The adult education focus group discussion was aimed at examining the existing research findings and strategic orientations of international associations. The discussion was also aimed at discovering new or specific (neglected) causes of inequality and identifying solutions that could lead to improvements.

The aim of the discussion of the adult education focus group was to identify challenges and key issues for the purposes of planning scientific and professional research, and the next phases of the project. Conducting focus groups is a step in establishing a structured dialogue between civil society organisations and key public policy-makers in education policies. Focus group findings will be used to map out social needs and challenges for each area. This should help define research parameters and the focus of research.

The focus group observed the perception of educational inequalities from the perspective of relevant stakeholders in the field of adult education. Two crucial sets of issues were discussed:

1. How do important stakeholders in the field of adult education perceive educational inequalities in Croatia?
2. If stakeholders identified any educational inequalities, how do they perceive any possibilities of their elimination from adult education in Croatia?

Only one focus group had been planned for adult education, so it was a challenge to find the optimal number of stakeholders from key adult education policy-makers, regulators, academia, implementing organisations and stakeholders who can provide a user perspective. With this in

mind, the basic idea behind the project was to be taken into account, i.e. the involvement of civil society and other non-state actors in the preparation of adult education policies.

Representatives of key government bodies in charge of adult education, representatives of professional organisations, associations, and representatives of the academic community have been proposed. Representatives of the following bodies and organisations were invited (and participated):

- Ministry of Science and Education
- Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy
- Agency for Vocational Education and Training
- Croatian Employment Service
- Croatian Andragogy Society
- Association for Adult Education at the Croatian Chamber of Commerce
- Croatian Employers' Association
- Public Open University Zagreb
- Public Open University Čakovec
- University of Rijeka (2 representatives)
- Association of Cities in the Republic of Croatia

The representatives from professional associations were directly involved in the implementation of adult education and could, therefore, reflect a national perspective and provide immediate implementation insights in adult education. Regarding other implementing organisations, it was imperative to include organisations that implement programmes relevant to this project (such as programmes for the unemployed in underdeveloped areas, the elderly, Roma and digital education).

1. Definition of educational inequality in adult education

The focus group discussion largely confirmed the theoretical findings to date on inequalities and difficulties of including adults in education. In this sense, the focus groups confirmed the difficulties or unequal participation faced by marginalised groups in adult education, as well as obstacles to participation in adult education (personal, dispositional and structural). All this was placed in the context of the overall negative situation regarding the participation of adults in education in Croatia, and of long-term and slow reforms in the adult education system.

The analysis of the testimonies of the participants showed that they provided fresh suggestions in certain aspects, supported the basic findings with examples and helped create a clear picture of the state of adult education in Croatia.

1.1. Types of inequality and disadvantaged groups

Participants highlighted inequalities related to the economic and social characteristics of potential participants, their age, residence, physical or other impairments (disabilities) or other elements of their exclusion. The main emphasis was thus on target groups and individuals who, due to some of these characteristics, do not participate in adult education. The following groups were highlighted:

- the elderly
- women aged 35 to 50,
- people with disabilities

- people living in rural areas
- Roma
- people with lower levels of education
- people of low socioeconomic status.

1.2. Causes of inequality

Participants first attributed the causes of inequality in participation of adults in education to a group of personal barriers. This refers to the lack of appropriate time in the social environment in which the participants live, lack of financial resources, psychological barriers of participants who due to the social environment, lack of knowledge or lack of self-confidence are less involved in adult education. The second group of causes refers to the method of preparation and implementation of the programme (structure, methodology and place). The third group includes systemic causes, i.e. the institutional basis for the implementation of adult education that creates difficulties and unequal access for students.

The obstacles to participation in adult education identified in this discussion are consistent with the obstacles identified by Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) in their influential work. They were similarly identified in the analysis of the European Commission (2012) and in case of Croatia described by Žiljak, Alfirević, Pavičić and Vučić (2018). These are basically structural, situational and psychological or dispositional obstacles. For the purposes of this analysis, and based on the results of the discussion, the taxonomy has been partially modified and obstacles have been grouped into personal (psychological and dispositional), institutional (or structural) and programme obstacles.

1.2.1. Personal obstacles

Personal obstacles mentioned in the participants' answers refer to the individuals' financial condition (insufficient income), lower educational level, lower motivation and negative experiences in previous education. The discussion mentioned a paradox that is well known in adult education: the low level of involvement of those adults who need education the most: individuals with lower levels of education. This cause has been confirmed in Croatia through previous research (Žiljak, Alfirević, Pavičić and Vučić, 2018). Fear, difficulty coping with stigma and lack of self-confidence have been cited as primary causes.

An important problem for marginalised groups is the lack of basic knowledge and skills that makes it difficult to participate in educational programmes and reduces the motivation to participate. These shortcomings are related to the problem of the above-mentioned paradox in adult education.

> *"One of the reasons why they find it very difficult to get involved in these processes is that they do not have enough prior knowledge, so these basic skills would not only help them further develop these skills but also strengthen their self-confidence."* (Expert 1)

One of the obstacles mentioned as an important reason for non-participation in adult education programmes was lack of time. The time limitations of women due to family obligations were especially emphasised.

> *"It is difficult to fit into their family responsibilities the obligations associated with education. They are supposed to handle housework, organise babysitting for practical classes."* (Expert 2)

However, a conflicting opinion within the focus group mentioned that lack of time is often used as an excuse and that the real reasons lie elsewhere. In this case, lack of time should be placed in the context of personal priorities, family relationships or social services that can free up time for learning.

"That lack of time, as seen in all research and regardless of the level of education, is ultimately an excuse. They never have time, it doesn't suit them in the morning, it doesn't suit them in the afternoon no matter how we try to organise classes." (Expert 3)
"Lack of time was cited as the main reason, so we can ask why do people not want to invest their time in education. Because they don't have enough, because they have two small children or because they can't see the benefits of education?" (Expert 4)

Socioeconomic situation was mentioned as the next reason. There were conflicting statements in this part as well. For some groups, participants listed prices and course fees as important obstacles or incentives for participation. Examples of the education of the elderly were mentioned, for whom the fee for attending a university of the third age is too high in relation to low pensions. This would mean that this option can only be used by retirees with higher pensions.

"In this age group (third age), in our opinion, the main reason for non-participation is the money needed for participation in one of these programmes." (Expert 12)

Another example mentioned was the education of Roma, who tend to get involved only when they get compensated for participating in education.

"They get involved when their education is financed, when their travel is financed and when they receive compensation for that education. The Employment Service does this quite well. But then when they push a project without funding for minimum compensation planned under the budget and measures implemented by the Institute, then it is difficult to get them interested in education." (Expert 5)

Nevertheless, a dissenting opinion within the group suggested that too much emphasis is placed on financial obstacles as a reason for unequal participation in adult education. Namely, some participants stated that, based on their experiences and surveys conducted across institutions, it can be concluded that financial obstacles are not crucial. On the contrary, it was mentioned that free programmes are appreciated less, and participants do not attend them as enthusiastically and responsibly as those that they pay for.

"This surprised us somewhat because we always think if we throw money at something it will happen somehow. It is clear that money is not the main reason why something doesn't happen." (Expert 4)

"It often turns out that, in the case of people who are fully covered, financially, we often see a big drop-out rate for such programmes. When a person even partially participates in funding they are more motivated to complete the programme. You can see that this research and most others show that finances are not the biggest problem." (Expert 6)

Another reason for unequal participation is related to personal (psychological) reasons. The reason why certain groups of people are less involved in adult education even though they have a distinct need for education (e.g. lower educated people) is that they have less insight

into the opportunities provided by additional education, they are less motivated and they are held back by negative experiences (failure) from their previous education.

"The problem is people with lower levels of education, i.e. people who left the education system early. It is paradoxical that those who need education the most are the ones that are the most difficult and the least likely to get involved in adult education. Their motivation is low and this is related to the disappointment they experienced in their regular education. They do not see what education could provide." (Expert 2)

"There is less participation (in percentage) of people with lower education or lower level of education, and in andragogical theory this is known as the andragogical paradox." (Expert 6)

There is not only a certain stigma to which some people do not want to be exposed, but there is also the fear of new situations which the participants find themselves in. These challenges are particularly prominent among the elderly.

"I can't get an education at the age of 50 because society will laugh at me. There are many such obstacles, visible and invisible." (Expert 6)

"In a way, we all know the reasons. For the elderly, it is the fear of something new, they are not ready to learn, they are not ready to adapt to new circumstances in which they would find themselves in if they decided to get involved in education and take on certain responsibilities." (Expert 2)

Most of the participants stressed the importance of strengthening the intrinsic motivation of participants in adult education. This has been highlighted as one of the crucial factors for participation in and completion of these programmes.

1.2.2. Programme obstacles

According to the participants, a number of factors that hinder adults' participation in education could be found in the educational programmes themselves. The programmes could be considered as problematic if they are not flexible enough or adapted to adult learner. A particularly important reason is the disregard for the previous experiences and knowledge of learners. In the case of learners with lower levels of education, a problem arises if the programmes do not address and strengthen learners' basic skills and elementary knowledge. The location of the programme could also present a problem regarding the distance and inaccessibility of the place of education.

Programmes are often insufficiently flexible or tailored to specific target groups, especially in primary adult education. There is an often-cited example of the book "*Vlak u snijegu*" ("A Train in the Snow"), a children's book that is not suited for adult students but is still being assigned as mandatory reading.

"Now, formal programmes are very often a copy of programmes from the regular system. And this is what my colleague has just mentioned, examples of primary education programmes." (Expert 7)

It was emphasised that the previous experience and knowledge of the participants are insufficiently taken into account in the implementation of the programme. Examples were

provided of disregard within the educational process and of the lack of appropriate procedures for assessing previously acquired knowledge.

> *"We have examples where experienced seafarers have to take an exam at the Faculty of Maritime Studies and then have to explain where the bow is and where the stern is."* (Expert 7)

Programme obstacles are especially prominent in programmes for elderly students. It is necessary to understand the interests, motivations and expectations of the participants in order to create programmes that best suit their needs.

> *"We have a rising number of highly educated elderly people - they are no longer asking for any kind of programme. They are looking for quality programmes and we need to move away from the reasoning that the elderly only want a place to hang out or something like that. "* (Expert 12)

An integral part of this problem is the location where the programme is being held: distance, (un)availability and (in)accessibility of places of education.

> *"Transit from location to location, accessibility of space, because institutions certainly cannot conform to just one student."* (Expert 1)

The participants especially highlighted the problem of organizing educational programmes in rural areas. In addition to providing ample accessibility (which is especially important for people with disabilities and people with walking difficulties), it is also important to provide options on reaching these locations.

> *"Travel connections are becoming increasingly difficult and becoming impossible without cars. In rural areas, the female population, especially the older female population, does not have a driving licence. This group is faced with an obstacle to participating in education from the very beginning. "* (Expert 8)

Nevertheless, different opinions were expressed on this topic during the discussion. For example, a representative of a national agency stated that Croatia is well covered with adult education institutions and their number and distribution enable access to programmes in all parts of Croatia.

1.2.3. Institutional obstacles

Institutional problems were observed at the macro, meso and micro levels. They refer to systemic solutions and organisations at the national level, support and organisation at the regional and local level, and the circumstances of implementation within the adult education organisations.

Weaknesses of the system were mentioned in several responses, and it was stated very directly that the system itself creates inequality.

> *"Personally, I think that inequality is mostly generated by the system. A poorly organised or out-dated system generates inequalities, no matter the target group. Yes, people don't have time, but then why doesn't the system enable various forms of online education, which should be of high quality?"* (Expert 7)

The participants stated that it's very difficult to significantly change the adult education system if knowledge and investing in knowledge are not appreciated. Some media examples that questioned investment in adult education were also cited.

"Imagine this, the information leaked to the public is that the state will subsidise educational packages, vouchers, similar to the one in France, worth 500 Euros. And then a journalist says that it's complete nonsense. People are fighting for their livelihood, and they are handing out financial aid for education. Anyone smart enough will use the money to put in laminate, fix the bathroom, etc." (Expert 6)

Speaking of the cooperation between actors within the existing institutional framework; participants noted aspects that should be worked on. There was no particular criticism, but not many commendations either.

"We collaborate just so that no one says we don't. I think that the associations in adult education, the Ministry and the Agency collaborate pretty well. We do not always see eye-to-eye with the scientific community, but I think we have quite a good synergy compared to other systems." (Expert 9)

Most of the participants stated that the system is being reformed too slowly. They especially referred to disregard of existing proposals and prepared solutions.

"The proposed system of recognition of professional competencies at levels 3,4,5, not including 6, has been sitting in the drawer of the National Centre for External Evaluation of Education for the last 3.5 or 4 years." (Expert 10)

"I have been doing this for the last 33 years and those who have known me know that I have been dealing with these problems for almost 33 years. Sometimes I get the feeling that we are standing in one place." (Expert 6)

On the other hand, the opinion was expressed that public criticism of the adult education system was excessive and that it could harm the system itself. According to that opinion, such criticism harms the public image of adult education.

"When we say that something is uncoordinated or slow, and so we reiterate this in such groups, and we see things from our perspective - we need to look at the bigger picture because our statements can have far reaching consequences. If you say that out of context, among people who are not part of the education system, who are not in lifelong learning, they focus on that one thing and say nothing works." (Expert 9)

One of the systemic shortcomings is the insufficient education of adult education professionals. There are no continuous university programmes for adult educators and professionals working in adult education. This is reflected in the lack of professionalism and appropriate action in this delicate part of the education system.

"There is a shortage of well-educated professionals, people who fully understand the adult education system and can then adapt the system to the adult. Unfortunately, we have a situation where people often enter the adult education system and then treat adults as if they were children, which I think is not good. They behave like they are children." (Expert 6)

New university programmes in andragogy and the long-term implementation of the GlobALE curriculum have been mentioned as good examples in this area. This curriculum is implemented by the Agency for Vocational Education and Training, is free for professionals in adult education and has so far reached a large number of users.

Insufficiently developed advisory services were noted at institutional level. Their role is to inform, motivate and guide students, and are particularly important for disadvantaged groups.

"What services do we even have to offer in education? Here, I see a solution in the formation of various, whatever we might call them, counselling centres, or career management centres. Something that is very well recognised abroad, the advisory function is extremely important." (Expert 7)

2. Causes of educational inequality in adult education

It can be concluded that almost all participants agree on which groups face disadvantages and face difficulties in participating in adult education. They clearly identified most of the obstacles and limitations that prevent these groups from participating as much as the rest of the population. They clearly supported the idea that it is primarily a question of creating equal opportunities and incentives for those who need them. It is up to the individual and it is in their responsibility to decide how to seize those opportunity and make the best of them. The focus of the discussion was the right to choose the type and manner of education, to respect the diversity of personal interests, preferences and personal goals. Given the different viewpoints of the participants, each put more emphasis on the dimensions arising from their own immediate experience (most of the participants are all very experienced actors in adult education), the research they conducted or their perception of education policy implementation and their own role in it.

Therefore, there are differences in the definition of obstacles (such as financial), criticism of past processes or relations between actors. These differences are not crucial and do not affect the basic results. Personal reasons were clearly noted (which are often related to the social position of persons), and programme goals (adaptability, flexibility, feasibility of the programme) and the institutional dimension of the problem were clearly identified. Obstacles are very often interconnected and form an intertwined network of mutual influences.

3. Opportunities for addressing educational inequalities in adult education

The focus group participants were highly motivated to propose instruments and policy measures that could improve the possibility of equal participation of people in adult education. However, their answers implied certain doubts considering the possibility of implementation of the presented proposals. Nevertheless, the desire for change at all levels remains: at the level of the entire adult education system, at the level of the professional community and at the level of adult education institutions.

3.1. Acceleration of legal changes and updating the system to new needs.

Mention has been made of the Adult Education Act, ordinances, updating the national classification of occupations, and regulating the quality assurance system.

"As for the recognition of prior learning, it is clear that the Ministry should resolve this with a new act, and with this new act the Ministry is going to recognise previous levels of education. So I hope that this will come to life soon and remove this obstacle that we are talking about. " (Expert 1)

"The first thing we need to do is to pass a new Adult Education Act." (Expert 9)

Of particular interest is the position of new occupations and programmes developed for these occupations as part of ESF projects, and which have not been added to the national classification of occupations yet.

"Because we still have some occupations, developed programmes that are not included in the National Classification of Occupations. Speaking from the operational level, when a person comes to me with qualifications for this occupation, I cannot register their occupation, because the occupation cannot be searched for by the employer, i.e. the counsellor. I think that a lot should be done to address this issue and the National Classification of Occupations should be updated as soon as possible." (expert 2)

3.2. Cooperation and horizontal coordination

Participants also indicated the need for a consensus and strengthening synergies among key actors.

"A national consensus should be reached on where we are and where we are going next." (Expert 6)

"In general, I think that we who work in state bodies and you who work in adult education institutions need greater synergy so that we can all move forward together, because only in this way can we understand the whole problem." (Expert 1)

3.3. Developing programmes that are flexible and modular

The need for the development of flexible, modularly conceived programmes was repeatedly mentioned in the discussion, citing new possibilities for running shorter programmes. All this should be accompanied by the implementation of a quality assurance system. It was emphasised that the experiences during the COVID epidemic showed the possibilities and advantages of online teaching.

"If someone said that online education is inferior, they would be mistaken. However, a lot of effort should be invested in online education and we should have trained staff to do it well. We could have the opportunity to join classes at ten in the evening. It doesn't have to be limited to a specific time." (Expert 7)

"It is necessary to think through a quality assurance system, especially if we want to further open the opportunity for education through shorter forms." (Expert 4)

3.4. Interconnectedness with primary and higher education

Participants emphasised that regular primary education is the foundation for lifelong learning and future participation in adult education.

"We should strive to prepare the children that we are now educating through the regular system, to prepare these children to be intrinsically motivated as adults, to be equipped with key competencies for lifelong learning." (Expert 1)

Adult education reform is also linked to higher education, through the education of experts, or education of adults at universities . Namely, the adult education system in Croatia currently does not include higher education, so this should be taken into account.

"Adults in higher education - no one talks about them. Everyone talks about higher education, but there is no such thing as a target group of adults in higher education." (Expert 7)

Another dimension of the connection with higher education is the development of andragogical programmes at universities.

"The profession of adult educated has now been codified. We are also working on graduate studies. This will help at least a little to systematise the training of educators." (Expert 6)

3.5. Strengthening focused financial subsidies while keeping a user perspective (vouchers)

The proposal to provide vouchers for adult education has received positive feedback as a solution. They would include financial subsidies that respect the interests and expectations of learners, and are available both to the employed and the unemployed.

"We are now trying to work out vouchers, which means that a person can choose a programme to attend, with some counselling, career guidance and assistance." (Expert 11)

"The topic of vouchers is, I think, a good opportunity for democratisation and access to education for all, where they can relate to targeted programmes that make sense for society to invest in, and where we could intervene geographically." (Expert 4)

3.6. Strengthening the user perspective in procedures

The focus should be on users, i.e. participants in adult education - their interests, motivations and wishes.

"We have to put ourselves in those people's shoes. We always speak on behalf of some institutions. Well, we pay the course for them, and we give them access, and we provide the course and so on, but we need to better understand their intrinsic motivation and what is really of interest for these people. " (Expert 11)

3.7. Impact of local budgets

Another interesting proposal was to strengthen the initiatives of local and regional authorities to build "gender-aware budgets". They should help expand the range of social services that reduce family-related obstacles (especially for women) to access adult education.

"Creating gender-aware budgets, or rather family-aware budgets, is extremely important in this context. For example, if a mother or father knows that their child had a hot meal at school, they will have one less thing to worry about, maybe they could use this time for education, maybe something else. From this we see that local, city budgets are directly related to the availability of social services in the community, so it is important to work on the inclusion of these groups." (Expert 1)

3.8. Strengthening informational and promotional activities

All participants agreed that promotional activities should be bolstered to encourage interest in participation in adult education.

New initiatives should build on the activities of the Lifelong Learning Week and the existing strategy for the promotion of lifelong learning. One motion that everyone agreed on was the initiative to declare a Year of Lifelong Learning.

"We should think about a Year of Lifelong Learning. We had the Decade of Literacy. A year of lifelong learning in which we would all get involved in and promote because in 2024 we get the first PIAAC results and then everyone will be shaking their heads. We should not wait for that, but we should intervene earlier and work throughout the year of lifelong learning to raise everyone's awareness of the need to participate in lifelong learning." (Expert 1)

"At state level, just like we have international days of this and that, I think we could do something as Slovenia did: Učeća se dežela ['The Country is Learning *in Slovenian*]. *In addition to Lifelong Learning Week, let's declare one year the Year of Lifelong Learning. Expand people's horizons."* (Expert 6)

There was also a proposal to create a unique web portal where participants could easily see the offer of available courses and choose the one that suits them best. It was noted that some institutions have already implemented this, but it is still not part of a systematic effort of all adult education institutions.

3.9. Strengthening advisory activities.

The question of whether new institutions should be established for existing activities or existing ones should be supported was discussed. Ultimately, all participants agreed that the existing services of the Croatian Employment Service should receive more support and that the organisation of counselling in institutions should be further developed or modified.

"We do have these existing institutions, but to form departments within them, experts who will then advise on all these issues, career management and so on. But we need to have people like this, we need to have professional staff who will do that, and those are really serious matters." (Expert 5)

"As for the work itself, of counselling and individual informing, I can responsibly say that the Croatian Employment Service has very well structured capacities, human resources from pedagogues, psychologists and employment counsellors who provide information to the unemployed about educational opportunities, opportunities for inclusion in workshops. However, this pandemic has put the process on hold for a while now." (Expert 2)

4. Proposed policy instruments

Legislative solutions, promotional activities, organisational changes and financial incentives were listed as proposals of instruments that would improve the current situation regarding the availability of adult education. It should be noted that the focus group participants mentioned almost all aspects and all types of instruments that are used adult education policies and which have been analysed within adult education policies in Croatia and the European Union (Žiljak, 2018). A book by Pastuović and Žiljak lists the following instruments in adult education policies:

Table 1. Types of policy instruments in adult education

1. Information and persuasion	
2. Binding decisions taken on the basis of public authority	
3. Financing	Subsidies for programme implementation
	Strengthening the capacity of professionals, institutions and systems
4. Organisational changes in the adult education system	

(Pastuović and Žiljak, 2018: p. 388)

Participants were very clear and specific in their proposals and covered all possible levels: from the EU level (vouchers from the financial package of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan), the national level (laws, regulations, and campaigns), the local level (budgets) and the implementation level (strengthening advisory functions).

Conclusion

All participants were both motivated and interested in solving the problem of inequality in adult education. They were aware of all dimensions of the problem, with emphasis placed on ensuring equal opportunities for participation in adult education programmes. Inequality was analysed multi-dimensionally, with an emphasis on ensuring equal opportunities. In this case, providing equal opportunities for marginalised groups means providing additional resources. This refers to the provision of counselling and guidance services. Financial support is likewise important, and the participants positively assessed the introduction of vouchers as a financial instrument that respects the interests and expectations of learners.

The perceptions of the focus group participants basically coincide with existing theoretical findings and with identified obstacles to participation in adult education (personal, programmatic, and institutional obstacles). Particular emphasis was placed on beneficiaries, on how informed and motivated they are, on their choice of programmes, as well as on strengthening the advisory role of providers (the concept of lifelong guidance) and on adapting programmes. In order to achieve changes and greater participation in adult education, it is important to work on promoting the idea of the knowledge society and the value of investing in one's own education. This is not only relevant in adult education, but it is particularly important in that sector, since adult participation in Croatia is among the lowest in the EU. Participants

clearly highlighted all the necessary elements of institutional change and were very specific in their recommendations. Participants also mentioned the critical role of the Agency for Vocational Education and Training in training and strengthening the capacity of andragogues. This is especially important in the context of frequent calls to terminate or merge this agency with another.

According to the participants' answers, inequalities in adult education are related to economic, social and age characteristics of potential participants, their place of residence, physical or other impairments (disabilities) or other elements of exclusion. Combining these individual characteristics with the shortcomings and lack of adaptation of existing programmes, as well as institutional weaknesses, results in inequality.

Groups that are less and with more difficulty involved in education are:

- the elderly
- women aged 35 to 50,
- people with disabilities
- people living in rural areas
- Roma
- people with lower level of education
- people of low socioeconomic status.

In the focus group discussion, the following measures were proposed to eliminate inequalities in adult education:

- Accelerating legal changes and modernizing the system to suit current needs;
- Improving cooperation and horizontal coordination;
- Developing programmes that are flexible and modularly designed;
- Strengthening the connection with changes in primary and higher education;
- Strengthening focused financial incentives while keeping a user perspective (vouchers);
- Respecting the interests of users and strengthening the user perspective;
- Increasing the positive impact of local budgets;
- Intensifying information and promotional activities;
- Strengthening advisory activities.

Below is an overview of opinions collected on the causes of unequal participation, proposed solutions and public policy instruments that would be used in these cases.

Table 2. Perception of focus group participants on obstacles, solutions for instruments for addressing inequalities in adult education *

Problems, obstacles / alternative opinions (Alt.)		Proposed solutions	Selected instruments of education policy
Personal obstacles			
Low level of education		Strengthening the connection with primary education and strengthening basic skills	Laws, regulations, strategies
Weak motivation		Strengthen advisory functions	Organisational change
Fear of the unknown and avoiding stigmatisation		Intensifying informational and promotional activities	Information and persuasion
Lack of time due to family commitments	Alt. Lack of time as an excuse	Change the structure of local budgets for family policies Strengthen advisory functions Develop more flexible implementation of programmes	Financial instruments Organisational changes
Socioeconomic situation of individual and financial support	Alt. Free programmes valued less	Strengthen focused financial incentives while keeping a user perspective (vouchers)	Financial instruments
Programme obstacles			
Inflexibility and unsuitability of programmes for adult learners		Develop programmes that are flexible, modularly designed Develop a quality assurance system	Laws, regulations Organisational changes
Disregard for experience and prior knowledge		Accelerate the regulation of the recognition of prior learning	Laws and regulations
Failure to respect the interests and expectations of participants		Strengthen the user perspective in procedures	Organisational change
Unavailability / inaccessibility of places of education	Alt. Sufficient number of institutions	Use the existing network of adult education institutions	Information Organisational change
Institutional obstacles			
Flaws of the whole system	Alt. Excessive criticism harms the system	Use ready-made analyses and apply them Link changes in the adult education system to changes in primary and higher education	Laws, rules, and regulations
Slow reform of the system		Accelerate legal changes and adapt the system to new needs	Laws, regulations and strategies
Low value of knowledge and education in public perception		Develop public campaigns and a stronger influence through media	Information and persuasion
Cooperation of actors		Achieve consensus and strengthen synergies among key actors	Organisational change
Lack of professional andragogues		University programmes and the GlobALE Curriculum	Financial Instruments Organisational change

Problems, obstacles / alternative opinions (Alt.)	Proposed solutions	Selected instruments of education policy
Low awareness of participants	Strengthen informative and promotional activities (Year of Lifelong Learning, information portal with educational offers)	Information and persuasion
Underdeveloped advisory function	Strengthen advisory functions in institutions and Croatian Employment Service	Information and persuasion Organisational change

Concrete aspects of personal, programme and institutional obstacles identified through the focus group will form the basis of an exploratory analysis of the 2007 and 2016 Eurostat Adult Education Survey, as well as secondary analysis of aggregate data from other recent adult education surveys conducted in Croatia.

The mapping carried out within this focus group has already identified the (non)existence of proposed activities that would affect certain mechanisms and aspects of inequality in approach. The analyses undertaken within the research have the potential to reveal the relative importance of some of the highlighted issues, i.e. to provide insight into new aspects which can later be related to proposed and existing mechanisms to reduce these inequalities, and to improve their design to promote inclusion.

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5. SYNTHESIS: EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES IN A LIFELONG PERSPECTIVE

Thomas Farnell & Mia Lakatoš

This integral report presents the findings of five thematic focus groups on educational inequalities in Croatia, in which 33 education system stakeholders participated. In order to provide a holistic picture of inequalities in a lifelong learning perspective, the focus groups covered all levels of the education system:

- early and pre-school education and early primary education
- secondary education
- higher education
- adult education.

The findings show that each level of the education system has a separate legal and institutional framework and faces specific challenges and needs, which (in addition to being numerous) are complex and multidimensional. In this sense, summarising the overall findings is a challenge and may risk overlooking important context-specific elements of individual educational levels. Nevertheless, the goal of the Croatian Lifelong Learning for All Network is to precisely address educational inequalities in a lifelong perspective, in a way that connects the different (and often fragmented and unrelated) levels of the education system. This section of the report therefore provides a synthesis of the findings of all conducted focus groups, based on the following thematic structure:

- **Stakeholder willingness to participate in structured discussions on educational inequalities;**
- **The level of stakeholder awareness of multidimensional aspects of educational inequalities;**
- **Inequality trends stemming from all levels of education; similarities in identified disadvantaged groups, types of inequalities and possible measures;**
- **Critical review of findings: shortcomings and open issues (e.g. aspects of inequality not mentioned in focus groups).**

Finally, in addition to the synthesis, this section of the report will discuss the implications of the findings on the next activities of the Croatian Lifelong Learning for All Network. This primarily refers to the design and implementation of research studies at each level of education, which will aim to further highlight the causes and consequences of educational inequalities identified in the findings of focus groups, but this time from the *perspective of learners and educational institutions.*

1. Stakeholder willingness to cooperate in the field of educational inequalities

A total of 33 representatives of institutions related to the education system participated in the focus groups, out of a total of 33 invited participants. The structure of participants according to type of institution was the following:

- Ministries – 6 participants
- Other public institutions – 7 participants
- Educational institutions – 10 participants
- Professional association – 2 participants
- Civil society organisations – 4 participants
- Other institutions – 4 participants

Given that the goal of the network is to establish a structured dialogue with policy-makers, it is significant that the focus groups involved representatives of all relevant institutions in the education system:

- Ministry of Science and Education
- Agency for Vocational and Adult Education
- Agency for Science and Higher Education
- Education Agency
- National Centre for External Evaluation of Education
- Educational institutions

In addition to the above institutions, the participants included representatives of local authorities and other public institutions such as:

- Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy
- Croatian Employment Service
- Office for Human Rights and the Rights of National Minorities of the Government of the Republic of Croatia
- Ombudsman for Children

The high response rate to the call for participation in the focus groups, as well as the amount of content generated through the participants' testimonials, indicates a **high level of willingness of stakeholders to actively participate in addressing educational inequalities in the education system in Croatia.** Despite this conclusion, a closer look at the structure of participants shows that the participation of certain institutions, and the seniority of the interlocutors, differed depending on the focus group. This points to the importance of establishing closer contacts and continuous communication with certain stakeholders in the next phases of the network to ensure the equal involvement of stakeholders in future activities of the network, especially in the structured dialogues and consultations on how to improve educational policies.

In conclusion, the mixed composition of focus groups ensured a diversity of perspectives and opinions, given that each focus group included representatives of educational institutions, associations, public agencies, ministries, local authorities and other organisations related to the education system.

2. Level of stakeholder awareness of educational inequalities

One of the most important findings of the focus groups is that stakeholders at all levels of education agree on *the existence* of educational inequalities and the importance of formulating measures to alleviate or eliminate them. This is especially important because, according to

Farnell (2013), strategic documents of the Croatian Government related to education have so far lacked a clear emphasis on educational inequalities, and policies related to inequality have tended to be framed in an incomplete way by targeting only specific groups (e.g. Roma and children with disabilities) or by proposing measures only at certain levels of the education system (e.g. most prominently in higher education).

Another important finding is that the researchers that led the focus groups concludes that the participants had a good understanding of the *multidimensionality* of problems and causes of educational inequality. As will be presented in more detail in the next section, the statements of respondents suggest that they understand that educational inequalities are influenced in parallel by the following intertwined factors:

- **Individual / family level factors:** socio economic status, place of residence, gender, age, ethnicity, disability, etc.
- **Educational institution factors:** accessibilities, material conditions, teaching staff, leadership, support services, etc.
- **Education system level factors:** legal framework, curriculum, flexibility of regulations, availability of financial support, quality assurance, etc

Such an understanding of the (possible) causes of inequality opens a wide space for future dialogue with stakeholders, paving the way for holistic approaches to tackling inequality (combining of measures at different educational levels). Despite the fact that the applied qualitative methodological approach did not aim at representative generalisation, it should be noted that the focus group participants were mostly in agreement in their understanding of educational inequality. However, there were certain issues that different stakeholders did not share the same views on - for example, in adult education different views were expressed on whether current network of adult education institutions is accessible enough or not or whether the cost of adult education programme is an obstacle to access or not. Such differences indicate the need for both additional data (through additional research studies) but also for continued dialogue on discussions problems and their potential solutions.

3. Synthesis of major trends of educational inequalities from a stakeholder perspective

As stated in the introduction, each level of the education system in Croatia has a specific legal and institutional framework and faces specific challenges related to educational inequalities. Since the network aims to alleviate and eliminate educational inequalities in a lifelong perspective, it is therefore important to ensure a dual perspective:

a) Take into account specific problems, needs and solutions at individual levels of education;
b) Identify the extent to which focus group findings point to trends and challenges that are present at *all* levels of education.

Related to this, one of the key issues for the next phases of the project will be **to determine whether it is possible (and desirable) to define a common framework for discussing educational inequalities at all levels of education in Croatia.**

In the following section we will present common patterns that emerge based on the data collected by all focus groups, as manifested through the identification of disadvantaged groups and of the dimensions and possible causes of inequality.

3.1. Identifying disadvantaged groups

The table below confirms that focus group participants at all levels of education identify a wide range of possible disadvantaged groups in education, and that **most of the identified groups appear as being disadvantaged at each level of education** .

Table 1: Disadvantaged groups according to focus group participants

	Early and pre-school education / primary education	Secondary education	Higher Education	Adult education
Persons of lower socioeconomic status	☑	☑	☑	☑
Persons living in rural, remote and isolated areas	☑	☑	☑	☑
Persons with developmental delays/disabilities	☑	☑	☑	☑
Members of national (or other) minorities		☑	☑	☑
Persons with challenging family circumstances[3]	☑	☑	☑	
Persons with mental and/or behavioural disorders	☑	☑	☑	
Adult/mature learners			☑	☑
Persons of a certain gender			☑	☑
LGBT persons		☑	☑	
Persons who work while studying			☑	

Note: The table indicates disadvantaged groups identified by focus group participants. The absence of a particular group from a certain level of education is not necessarily an indication that there is no such group at a disadvantage at that level, but that the focus group participants did not identify that group (due to limited time and / or limited information).

In general, the structure of identified disadvantaged groups largely reflects broader social inequalities. In this sense, inequalities and marginalisation of certain groups "spill over" from the general population into the education system. This points to the problem of multiple vulnerabilities and marginalisation of certain groups because some individuals are disadvantaged in several categories - for example, persons of lower socioeconomic status may also be geographically dislocated, have a disability and so on. Such a mirroring of broader

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[3] Including children from dysfunctional families, children in alternative care and children of Homeland War veterans.

social inequalities in the education system is undesirable because it reduces the effectiveness of education as a mechanism of social mobility for the groups that need it most.

3.2. Identifying factors influencing educational inequalities among disadvantaged groups

The following table summarises the focus group participants' views about the dimensions and causes of educational inequalities among disadvantaged groups. The table lists the types of challenges that are identified at all, or at least most, levels of education, based on the focus group results. The structure of the table shows, on the horizontal side, the factors that negatively affect access to education and educational performance, while the vertical side distinguishes between factors present at the level of individuals and their families, at the level of educational institutions and at the level of the entire education system. It is important to emphasise that the aim of this synthesis is to propose a structure to facilitate discussions about the dimensions of educational inequalities in a lifelong perspective. Not all the factors presented are necessarily present at all levels, and it remains crucial to contextualise this discussion at each educational level and for different disadvantaged groups.

	Factors that negatively affect **access to** education	Factors that negatively affect educational **performance**
Individual / family level	• Lower level of achievement at previous levels of education • Financial barriers to accessing education • Psychological barriers to access (e.g., low aspirations, low motivation)	• Unfavourable living/learning conditions at home • Unavailability/lack of family support for learning • Financial barriers during education • Experience of discrimination and feeling of stigmatisation
Educational institution level	• Insufficient accessibility of the institution (e.g., distance; physical access) • Insufficient flexibility of enrolment criteria	• Inadequate material conditions of educational institutions • Lack of teacher competencies for working with disadvantaged groups • Unavailability of professional support and counselling services • Insufficient flexibility of procedures of educational institutions
Education system level	• Inadequacy of legal framework • Unavailability/insufficiency of financial support • Inflexibility of regulations and laws	• Insufficiently inclusive curriculum • Inadequacy of initial teacher education and training (for inclusion) • Lack of cooperation between departments and other institutions in the system (e.g., with social welfare centres)
	Regional differences • Unequal availability of financial support • Unequal material conditions of educational institutions • Lack of monitoring of minimum quality standards in all educational institutions	

In addition to these factors, participants in several focus groups also cited broader societal challenges that pose an additional obstacle to addressing educational inequalities. The problem of lack of recognition of the value of education in society, the absence of public debate about educational inequalities and the low level of cooperation and trust among the various institutions of the system were highlighted.

3.3. Identifying future measures to alleviate / eliminate educational inequalities

The focus group participants identified a number of measures that could contribute to reducing/eliminating educational inequalities. The types of measures identified at different levels of education can be grouped into the following categories:

- **adopting new or amending existing laws, regulations and strategies** (e.g., changes in the system of student assessment and grading; allowing part-time students access to public financial support)
- **improving the implementation of existing regulations** (e.g., ensuring a sufficient number of support staff in schools; ensuring equal material conditions in all schools)
- **collecting and integrating of data on disadvantaged groups**
- **implementing organisational changes in educational institutions** (e.g., adoption of institutional regulations on working with learners from disadvantaged groups; strengthening school support services)
- **strengthening human resources** (e.g., training teachers to work with disadvantaged learners)
- **provision of financial instruments** (e.g. grants, free textbooks, subsidised transport)
- **informing and raising aspirations of learners** (e.g., about the advantages and opportunities for further education).

4. Critical review of the focus group findings

This synthesis of the focus group findings provides encouraging results for further work on the topic of educational inequalities in Croatia and for further structured dialogue with stakeholders on the topic. The synthesis has shown that key stakeholders of the system: (a) participated in all focus groups, (b) confirmed the importance of addressing inequalities at all levels of the system, (c) demonstrated a good understanding of the complexity and multidimensionality of inequalities and (d) demonstrated readiness to suggest possible solutions.

Since the focus group participants were mostly from institutions within the education system, it is important to critically consider the extent to which their views coincide with the reality on the ground, i.e. whether there are certain challenges or disadvantaged groups that were not the subject of focus group discussions but that should be included in future discussions on this topic. As a response to this question, the researchers and experts involved in the implementation of the focus groups concluded that the participants' statements were largely in line with existing data on the state of educational inequalities in Croatia, as well as the main theoretical knowledge in this area.

Nevertheless, there are several aspects of educational inequalities that were not directly mentioned in the focus groups, and which would be important to address in the following phases of the project:

- The focus groups did not directly identify the problem of the lack of a strategic framework for addressing educational inequalities in Croatia; this topic is only partially and insufficiently covered in the Croatian Strategy for Education, Science and Technology and is not explicitly stated as a problem or as a priority (except in the field of higher education).

- In the field of secondary education, the problem of socioeconomic stratification of the student population among gymnasiums, four-year vocational schools and other vocational schools was not directly mentioned, nor that three-year vocational schools have the highest proportion of students that are at risk of social exclusion.

In a broader sense, the focus group findings open a larger and more complex discussion on how to interpret the principles of 'equality' and 'equity' in education, as well as how the network will define these concepts in its work. Key issues include:

- How is the principle of reducing inequalities in education understood? Is the principle limited to ensuring equal access to and accessibility of education (such as setting a 'level playing field') or rather to ensuring truly equal opportunities? Is it necessary to ensure greater adjustments in the teaching process and in the level of support during the learning process, while still emphasising individual responsibility for educational outcomes? Or should we aim for equality of outcomes (or at least fairness of outcomes) of the educational process among different groups (in terms of levels of completion and level of acquisition of educational outcomes)?

- In what way and with what terminology should this discussion be framed in the Croatian context? Should we focus on the concepts of equality, equal opportunities, equity, diversity, inclusion, or 'the social dimension'? Or a combination of these concepts?

- Is it necessary to introduce measures that are equally accessible to all users of the system or targeted only at disadvantaged groups? Is it enough to introduce measures based on a 'deficit' approach to disadvantaged groups (e.g., lack of financial resources, lack of information, aspirations, etc.), or are measures needed to fundamentally transform the education system itself (e.g., curriculum adjustment, pedagogical methods for inclusion and acceptance of diversity)?

- To what extent are the system, institutions and society as a whole ready for some of the above interpretations of the principle of equity, or for some of the above types of measures?

In its next activities, the network will need to set a framework that addresses these dilemmas and proposes a direction for future public policies in Croatia.

5. Next steps

This report is the first step in launching a national dialogue on how we can ensure that lifelong learning, from early and pre-school education to higher education, is truly accessible to all and that the Croatian education system becomes more equitable and more inclusive. The focus group findings will now serve as a basis for the design and implementation of specific research studies at each level of education, aimed at further shedding light on the causes and consequences of educational inequalities, this time from the perspective of learners and educational institutions.

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ANNEX I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Early and pre-school education and early primary education

Focus group goal:

This focus group sought to deepen the understanding of educational inequalities in Croatia at the level of early and pre-school and at the level of primary education. The focus group was carried out through a structured dialogue with decision-makers (national and local), educational institutions and users of the education system in order to identify societal needs and public opinions regarding this social phenomenon.

The aim of the focus group was to determine how decision-makers and other relevant stakeholders perceive educational inequalities and the possibilities of alleviating them at the level of early and pre-school education and at the level of primary education.

Participants:

Given the goal of the focus group, and in accordance with the agreement of all involved project partners (formulated at an online meeting held on 1 April 2021) the focus group planned to include participants from the following institutions:

- Ministry of Science and Education
- Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy
- ombudspersons of the Croatian Government
- faculties participating in the initial education of educational and social-welfare stakeholders
- local governments
- civil society organisations working with disadvantaged children
- director of educational institutions
- educators and teachers.

The sample in question is a deliberate and appropriate sample formed on the basis of the goal of the focus group. All participants were invited to the focus group by e-mail, with a message explaining the purpose, manner and timing of its implementation. In addition to the basic invitation, invited participants were contacted by phone to confirm participation. Ten people responded to the invitation, one of whom was male and nine female. The final focus group participants were:

- an *employee* of one ministry
- two *university* teachers
- two *heads* of education departments in two different local government units
- an employee of the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children
- two *representatives* of civil society organisations

- *primary* school head teacher (representative of a professional association)

- one *teacher* (representative of a professional association)

- one *educator* (representative of a professional association).

At the beginning of the focus group, participants provided their written informed consent to participate, including consent to the recording and transcription of the interview while protecting the personal data of the participants in the public reporting of the results. Information about the project and the purpose of the focus group was provided to participants via e-mail, through oral contacts that preceded the focus group and at the beginning of the discussion.

Data collection:

The focus group was held online on 20 May 2021 using the Zoom application. The discussion lasted two hours (from 1 pm to 3 pm) and was organised in two subgroups. One subgroup consisted of representatives of local authorities, public institutions and faculties, and the other of representatives of civil society organisations, head teachers, educators and teachers. The first subgroup was led by Prof. Dejana Bouillet, PhD, and the other by Sanja Brajković.

After the presentation, the focus group participants answered the following groups of questions:

1. Definition of educational inequality

- What do you think educational inequality is?

- Do you consider educational inequality to be an important social issue / problem?

- Why / can you justify your answer?

2. Causes of educational inequality

- In which periods of a child's life and in which key situations / circumstances do you notice that educational inequality occurs?

3. Personal contribution to the prevention of and response to educational inequality

- Do you address educational inequality in your professional role? Please provide some examples.

- What personal influence do you have or what can you do in your workplace / association to address this issue? What can't you do that you would like to / that you consider necessary?

- How does the institution where you work relate to educational inequality (how does it respond to this social problem / phenomenon …)?

4. Improving society's response to educational inequality

- Are there opportunities to improve the response of society / of your institution/association ... to educational inequality?

- What do you suggest?

- Are there any system-level characteristics that increase educational inequality?
- Are there any system-level characteristics that reduce educational inequality?

5. Cooperation between institutions and systems in reducing educational inequality

- Does your organisation / institution cooperate with other institutions / organisations on the issue of educational inequality? With whom?
- In what way?
- Are there any organisations / institutions that you do not currently work with that you think you should?

6. Visibility of educational inequality

- Do you think that the issue of educational inequality is adequately represented / presented in the public?
- Do you have any examples?

At the end of the focus group, participants had the opportunity to talk about aspects of educational exclusion that they consider to be important and that were not covered in the previously presented issues.

Data analysis:

The conversation was transcribed and analysed using the method of content analysis. An interpretive phenomenological analysis was used as a way to investigate and discover the meaning of the life experiences or personal perceptions of a particular group about the researched phenomenon (Alase, 2017). This method was chosen because the research sought to gain insight into different perspectives on educational inequality in early and pre-school education and in primary education.

The content of the discussion was processed and interpreted according to the following steps:

- The transcripts were read to familiarise the researchers with the data and to identify words and phrases that were repeated in the answers;
- The identified words and phrases were grouped into more general topics to find key messages or ideas of participants;
- The data were categorised according to identified topics into meaningful units, according to categories and codes.

Examples of themes, categories, and codes:

Statements	Code	Category	Theme
"relaxing standards and flexibility"	REGULATIONS	POLICY	RIGHT TO EDUCATION
"there is not enough resolve on the part of the authorities to tackle this problem" "that we, as a society, are somehow, also facilitators of racially xenophobic policies and ethnic divisions and so on"	STRATEGIES		
"some individuals need it faster, some need it slower, some need something different"	INCLUSIVE	PRAXIS	
"there are many situations in which we actually have to remind them that addressing a child in a normal and dignified manner is something that they must to by default" "we have problems, not only in the regular system, we also have problems in special schools… because one would expect that you would have the highest level of understanding there will, when sometimes we actually have the lowest level of understanding. Special schools have the lowest level of expectations of their pupils. On the other hand, regular schools push children into special schools, if we are talking about children with developmental difficulties." "we hardly talk to children and young people at all"	NON-INCLUSIVE		
"… we approach everyone in a way that makes them feel comfortable. And then, again, let me come back to the example of my class, that is, my little school. So, I am happiest when a child takes its first step. Then I help him take the first step and repeat it and repeat it once more, then repeat it once more and we upgrade. I am very patient and persistent in this. That is how it should be implemented in the society as a whole."	ENGAGED	CHILDREN	RIGHT TO SUPPORT
"On the first day of school, it's happiness, it's beautiful, it's pride, it's that chattering here and there. How much, how much has to happen to them to make that smile that they had in the morning disappears?"	DISENGAGED		
"react together, together we have more power and send such messages to children"	SUPPORTING	STAFF / ENVIRONMENT	
"too many groups, then you cannot respond to the needs of all the children"	NON-SUPPORTING		
"change paradigms and the whole story"	POLICY	SYSTEM	PREVENTION

Statements	Code	Category	Theme
"very large legal restrictions… extremely important to relax"	REGULATIONS		
"very poor understanding of educators… establishing a licensing system" "That great part put in the effort, saw it as a challenge, as an opportunity to learn new technologies as an opportunity to learn and teach in the 21st century. And that should be rewarded."	QUALITY	INSTITUTION	
"access to the child within the system … forms of support, assistance, access…." "… We do not have the possibility of some kind of teaching assistant …" "!… Higher wages will not lead to a change in approach to the child"	SUPPORT		
"advocating and promoting and convincing decision-makers what is important and what is good" "I feel best when I rely on myself and work"	RESPONSIBILITY	INDIVIDUAL	
"working with children is a big responsibility and if someone didn't find themselves in it I think then they shouldn't even enter the system"	AUTONOMY		

These codes and themes help categorise and analyse the statements according to their underlying topics and implications.

2. Secondary education

Focus group goal

The aim of the focus group was to establish how decision-makers and other relevant stakeholders acting in the field of secondary education perceive educational inequalities and the possibilities of their reduction or elimination.

Participants

The focus group on secondary education was held on 12 April 2021 and out of a total of nine representatives invited to take part, a total of seven representatives participated in the focus group:

- Ministry of Science and Education - Sector for the Gifted and Children with Disabilities and Information Support of the Education System
- Education and Teacher Training Agency
- Agency for Vocational Education and Training
- Association of Croatian Secondary School Principals
- National Centre for External Evaluation of Education
- Office for Human and National Minority Rights of the Government of the Republic of Croatia
- Croatian Parliament - Education, Science and Culture Committee.

Research questions

The following research questions were formulated in accordance with the overall goal of the research:

1. How do decision-makers/stakeholders in the field of secondary education perceive educational inequalities in secondary education in Croatia?

2. How do decision-makers/stakeholders in the field of secondary education see the possibilities of reducing educational inequalities in secondary education in Croatia?

3. What are the current practices of decision-makers/stakeholders and associated institutions regarding the reduction of educational inequalities in secondary education?

Selection of participants

Focus group participants were selected from a deliberate sample that included the representatives of state institutions and non-profit organisations dealing with issues relevant to secondary education that were considered to be a sample of "best informants" on educational inequalities in secondary education. The described sample included representatives of the following state institutions and non-profit organisations: Ministry of Science and Education - Sector for Secondary Education and Adult Education and Sector for the Gifted and Children with Disabilities and Information Support of the Education System; Education and Teacher Training Agency; Agency for Vocational Education and Training; Association of Croatian Secondary School Principals; National Centre for External Evaluation of Education; Independent Trade Union of Secondary School Employees; Office for Human

and National Minority Rights of the Government of the Republic of Croatia; Croatian Parliament - Education, Science and Culture Committee. Invitations were sent to the heads of these institutions and organisations. Out of a total of nine representatives invited to take part, 7 took part (all except the representatives of the Independent Trade Union of Secondary School Employees and the Sector for Secondary Education and Adult Education of the Ministry of Science and Education).

The process of recruiting focus group participants took place in the first half of April 2021. In the first phase, the directors / heads of institutions were contacted by the Forum for Freedom of Education, and in consultation with experts from the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb (IDIZ). Potential participants were e-mailed with an invitation to participate in the research, which in addition to the invitation to the organisation (according to a template jointly created for the whole consortium) contained general information about the project, funding, research goal, data collection and ethical aspects of the research (the rights of participants before, during and after the research, and protection of personal data). After confirming the interest in participation, participants were provided with an informed consent and recording consent form and were asked to submit signed consent forms to the sender's e-mail before participating, as all participants in the research have done.

Confirmed focus group participants were, prior to focus group participation, provided, in writing, with basic information on the topic and process of the research as well as their right to refuse to participate in the research and to withdraw from participation at any time. They were told that the data collected would be used to produce a research report on the perception of educational inequalities and that no one but members of the research group would have access to audio and video recordings of the interviews. They were also guaranteed that their data will be protected by the use of codes and the removal of personal or any other data from which the identity of the participant could be established. Participants were told that they would be briefed on the findings of the research report.

The focus group was held on April 12 and lasted for approximately 120 minutes.

Data collection

Data were collected in a focus group conducted in an online environment using the Zoom platform. The discussion with the participants was moderated by Ph.D. Saša Puzić with the assistance of dr.sc. Iva Odak from the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb. The discussion was recorded in audio and video format.

Description of data analysis

A transcript of the focus group audio recording was drafted, with the names of the participants replaced by pseudonyms. A qualitative thematic analysis was applied in the analysis of the transcript, in which the topics of the analysis followed up on research questions that formed the basis of the protocol for the implementation of the focus group.

The analysis and the report were prepared by dr.sc. Saša Puzić, Ph.D., Ivana Jugović, Ph.D., Iris Marušić and Eli Pijaca Plavšić.

3. Higher Education (first focus group)

Focus group goal

The aim of the focus groups was to establish how decision makers and other stakeholders in higher education perceive educational inequalities and the opportunities for reducing or removing them.

Research questions

In line with the aim, three research questions were formulated:

1. How do the decision-makers/stakeholders in higher education perceive educational inequalities in Croatia?
2. What are the current practices of the decision-makers/stakeholders and their institutions for reducing educational inequalities in higher education?
3. How do the decision-makers/stakeholders in higher education view the opportunities for reducing/removing educational inequalities in Croatia?

Participants

Research participants were selected by using non-random sampling. The participants selected were members of the National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education which was assessed by the members of the research group as representing a sample of key informants about educational inequalities in higher education. In total, there were seven participants in this research, all employed in higher education institutions, agencies and the relevant Ministry and one student representative. The participants are employed at the following institutions:

- Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes
- Agency for Science and Higher Education
- Council of Polytechnics and Colleges of the Republic of Croatia, Edward Bernays University College
- European Students' Union
- Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek
- Ministry of Science and Education.
- University of Zadar

The recruitment of focus group participants took place in the first half of June 2021. In the initial stage, the potential participants were contacted who had been identified as key informants by the experts from the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, the Institute for the Development of Education and the Universitas association. The invitation to participate in the research was sent by e-mail to the potential participants. Along with the formal invitation to each organisation (a template was created for the entire consortium) the invitation letter comprised general information about the project and funding, research aims, data management and ethical aspects of the research (the participant's rights before, during and after the research; personal data protection). Once they confirmed their interest to participate, the participants were sent forms to provide their informed consent and recording consent. They were asked to e-mail the signed forms to the sender prior to the start of the study.

In total 17 participants were invited – eight agreed to participate and seven participated in the focus group. In some cases, the participants were contacted by phone by the researchers to provide them with additional information about the research.

The participants confirmed for the focus group were, prior to the start of the focus group, provided with basic information in written form about the research topic and procedure as well as their right to reject participating or withdraw from the research at any moment. They were told that the data obtained will be used to prepare a research report about the perception of educational inequalities and that no one other than the research group members will have access to audio and video recordings of the focus group. Furthermore, the participants were guaranteed that their data will be anonymised and that any personal or other data that could be used to identify the participants will be removed. The participants were told that they have a right to be provided with the results of the research and ask additional questions before, during and after participating in the research – for these purposes, they were given e-mail addresses of the researchers.

Data collection

Data was collected in the focus group conducted online via MS Teams. The conversation with the participants was moderated by Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt, MSc and Ana Skledar Matijević, PhD from the Institute for the Development of Research. Video and audio recordings were made.

Data analysis

The audio recording of the focus group was transcribed. The participants' names in the transcript were changed into pseudonyms. Thematic content analysis of the transcripts was performed in which the themes were closely linked with the three research questions that were used to design the protocol for the focus group. The analysis was conducted and the report prepared by the members of the project team from the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, the Institute for the Development of Education and the Universitas association.

4. Higher Education (second focus group)

Research aim

The aim of this focus group was to establish how decision-makers and other stakeholders in higher education perceive educational inequalities and the opportunities for reducing or removing them.

Research questions

In line with the aim, three research questions were formulated:
1. How do the decision-makers/stakeholders in higher education perceive educational inequalities in Croatia?
2. What are the current practices of the decision-makers/stakeholders and their institutions for reducing educational inequalities in higher education?
3. How do the decision-makers/stakeholders in higher education view the opportunities for reducing/removing educational inequalities in Croatia?

The structure of the report follows the research questions.

Participants

Research participants were selected by using non-random sampling. The participants selected were assessed by the members of the research group as representing a sample of key informants about educational inequalities in higher education. There were eight participants in this research, all representatives from higher education institutions, the relevant Ministry and student representatives. The participants represented the following institutions and bodies: University of Rijeka, University of Zadar, Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, Faculty of Organisation and Informatics in Varaždin, Croatian Students' Council and Ministry of Science and Education.

The recruitment of focus group participants took place in the first half of June 2021. In the initial stage, the potential participants were contacted who had been identified as key informants by the experts from the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, the Institute for the Development of Education and the Universitas association The invitation to participate in the research was sent by e-mail to the potential participants. Along with the formal invitation to each organisation (a template was created for the entire consortium) the invitation letter comprised general information about the project and funding, research aims, data management and ethical aspects of the research (the participant's rights before, during and after the research; personal data protection). Once they confirmed their interest to participate, the participants were sent forms to provide their informed consent and recording consent. They were asked to e-mail the signed forms to the sender prior to the start of the study.

In total, nine participants were invited and eight participated in the focus group. After the initial invitations had been sent out, the researchers contacted the potential participants by phone encourage the recruiting. Whenever the participants would request additional information about the research and the project this was provided by e-mail or phone.

The participants confirmed for the focus group were, prior to the start of the focus group, provided with basic information in written form about the research topic and procedure as well

as their right to reject participating or withdraw from the research at any moment. They were told that the data obtained will be used to prepare a research report about the perception of educational inequalities and that no one other than the research group members will have access to audio and video recordings of the focus group. Furthermore, the participants were guaranteed that their data will be anonymised and that any personal or other data that could be used to identify the participants will be removed. The participants were told that they have a right to be provided with the results of the research and ask additional questions before, during and after participating in the research – for these purposes, they were given e-mail addresses of the researchers.

Data collection

Data was collected in a focus group conducted online via Zoom. The conversation with the participants was moderated by Assistant Professor Iva Odak from the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb. Video and audio recordings were made.

Data analysis

The audio recording of the focus group was transcribed. The participants' names in the transcript were changed into pseudonyms. Thematic content analysis of the transcripts was performed in which the themes were closely linked with the three research questions that were used to design the protocol for the focus group. The analysis was conducted and the report prepared by the members of the project team from the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, the Universitas association and the Institute for the Development of Education.

5. Adult education

Research goal

The aim of the discussion of the adult education focus group was to identify challenges and key issues for the purposes of planning scientific and professional research, and the next phases of the project. Conducting focus groups is a step in establishing a structured dialogue between civil society organisations and key public policy-makers in education policies. Focus group findings will be used to map out social needs and challenges for each area. This should help define research parameters and the focus of research.

Research questions

The focus group observed the perception of educational inequalities from the perspective of relevant stakeholders in the field of adult education. Two crucial sets of issues were discussed:

1. How do important stakeholders in the field of adult education perceive educational inequalities in Croatia?
2. If stakeholders identified any educational inequalities, how do they perceive any possibilities of their elimination from adult education in Croatia?

Along with each of these questions, a number of follow-up questions were included in order to keep the discussion moderated as well as possible.

I. Perception of the current situation

1. Do participants have any subjective insight into which groups of citizens participate less in adult education?

   Follow-up questions
   a) Which groups are the most difficult to get involved (for example as part of free participation in ESF projects), which are the fastest to give up or are the most difficult to retain and keep motivated in adult education?
   b) Which people participate more or would like to participate more?
   c) In which types of adult education are these differences most pronounced (formal or non-formal education, vocational or non-vocational, short-term or long-term education)? Do the various types of education affect these differences in participation at all?

2. Based on research, analysis or stakeholder experiences: what are the reasons for the lower rates of participation of individual groups? What are the key obstacles?
3. Is this a problem? What do stakeholders think of how much the other parties perceive this as a problem? Why?

4. What is currently being done to address the problem of insufficient adult participation? What are examples of good practice at the level of organisations, individual ministries and agencies or at the level of the entire education system?

II. Possibilities/prospects for eliminating educational inequalities in Croatia (stakeholder position)

1. What should be done as a matter of priority to improve the situation?

    Follow-up questions
        a. What instruments should be used: laws and regulations, more generous or different funding, information, organisational change, capacity building of all stakeholders?
        b. Which actors should play key roles in these changes (ministries and agencies, employers, educational organisations and their professional associations, scientific and higher education institutions, civil society organisations)? What should be their relationship and role?

2. What data on adult education should be collected under this project in order to provide the best possible analytical basis for proposals and guidelines for improving the adult education system, especially with regard to unequal participation of users of educational programmes? What information is missing the most?

If stakeholders thought something had been left out, they had the possibility to discuss additional topics. This thematic framework was used to plan the focus group discussion, analyse the discussion and draft research conclusions and recommendations.

Participants and methodology

Sampling technique applied
A basic approach to the researched problem has been agreed at the consortium level. An intentional sample has been established, i.e. stakeholders who will provide the best information, represent different interests and perspectives on the current situation.

Only one focus group had been planned for adult education, so it was a challenge to find the optimal number of stakeholders from key adult education policy-makers, regulators, academia, implementing organisations and stakeholders who can provide a user perspective. With this in mind, the basic idea behind the project was to be taken into account, i.e. the involvement of civil society and other non-state actors in the preparation of adult education policies.

Sample
The sample was defined on the basis of discussions and proposals within the consortium, dialogue between professionals and researchers who directly conduct research in the field of adult education, and coordination with project leaders.

Representatives of key government bodies in charge of adult education, representatives of professional organisations, associations, and representatives of the academic community have been proposed.

Representatives of the following bodies and organisations were invited (and participated):

- Ministry of Science and Education
- Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy
- Agency for Vocational Education and Training
- Croatian Employment Service
- Croatian Andragogy Society

- Association for Adult Education at the Croatian Chamber of Commerce
- Croatian Employers' Association
- Public Open University Zagreb
- Public Open University Čakovec
- University of Rijeka (2 representatives)
- Association of Cities in the Republic of Croatia

The representatives from professional associations were directly involved in the implementation of adult education and could, therefore, reflect a national perspective and provide immediate implementation insights in adult education. Regarding other implementing organisations, it was imperative to include organisations that implement programmes relevant to this project (such as programmes for the unemployed in underdeveloped areas, the elderly, Roma and digital education).

Recruitment process

Potential participants for the focus group were selected based on their experience and immediate activities in conducting adult education. Recruitment of participants began by sending invitation letters to organisations that were to be represented in focus groups (March 23, 2021). The invitation letter was consolidated at consortium level.

Most of the participants represent key figures in these organisations, so the choice of representatives on behalf of the organisation was much easier. People at key positions in relevant ministries were contacted with suggestions for representatives that would, in the opinion of the researchers, best suit the optimal profile for the focus group participants. Researchers conducted at least one telephone conversation with the representatives of each organisation and potential participants, explaining the goals and benefits of the research. Additionally, candidates were presented with several dates for the debate.

All invited candidates and organisations were interested in participation and the date for the debate was set without major difficulties. Confirmations arrived by emails, letters and scanned documents. It was far easier to agree on all the details of the cooperation than to obtain all the required consent and participation confirmations. However, this was all done within the set deadline.

Protection of participant rights

All participants were informed about the protection of their privacy, anonymity in the publication of results and the possibility to fully express their opinions without exposing themselves to possible administrative sanctions. All participants signed the informed consent, agreeing to participation and audio-visual recording. This was reiterated at the beginning of the focus group prior to obtaining the consent from all participants.

It should be noted that all participants had prior experience of participating in focus groups and similar forms of information collection and did not need to be particularly convinced of the reliability of the analysis. In addition, focus group participants mostly occupy key positions in their organisations and have the authority to publicly represent and explain their organisation's attitudes, although they did not explicitly represent their organisation in their opinions presented at the focus group.

Data collection

Data collection method
Data was collected using a focus group method with a clearly defined thematic framework of the discussion (elements of inequality in adult education) and a realistic positioning of this discussion as the first phase in the overall research process (Chioncel, Van Der Veen, Wildemeersch and Jarvis, 2003).

Conditions under which the data collection took place
Data were collected during the focus group discussion. Due to epidemiological reasons and limitations (due to the COVID 19 epidemic) the focus group was held on April 14, 2021. between 12:00 PM to 2:00 PM via the Google Meet platform. The discussion was recorded with the consent of all participants. The recording was stored with the organisers and moderators of the focus group (Tihomir Žiljak) and is available to project leaders and researchers who were present at the focus group.

The discussion was moderated by one moderator (Tihomir Žiljak) as planned in the project. The focus group was also monitored by Teo Matković (project researcher) who took notes.

The quality of the connection and login capability were very good. Participants were asked to express their opinions strictly orally, and the chat tool was used only to report for the order of the discussion. In this way, the recordings (video and audio) provide a complete picture of the participants' opinions.

Data analysis method

The process of preparing data for analysis
The first phase of preparing the data for analysis was to repeatedly review the recording and transcribe the discussion. This was Tihomir Žiljak's task. After that, the transcript was read several times and the names of the participants were replaced by their general description (for example: a representative of the ministry, a representative of the university, a representative of a national agency, etc.). In parallel, the notes made by Teo Matković were reviewed. Combined, they provided a clearer insight into the highlights of the discussion, predominant topics, and the individual statements that are important for the project.

Analysis strategy used
The thematic analysis was designed in accordance with the basic project tasks: description of inequalities, key topics defined by project objectives and information needed for further stages of research, and recommendations.

The analysis followed the answers provided by the participants. Both the discussion and the analysis took into account the sectorial limitations of the focus group (adult education), but also the necessary connection with other levels of education. This is especially true of higher education, which is not included in adult education in the Croatian education system.

Description of the coding procedure
Coding was done manually in a Word document and was thematically defined. In repeated reading, similar or matching statements were identified and colour-coded. This way, operative codes were established, which were then refined, synthesised and finally determined and defined.

Based on this we established categories relating to the same problems, solutions or proposal. Possible different opinions or different variants of solutions to the same issue were also noted, which were then defined by subcategories. Based on this, suggestions, comments or assessments were synthesised and will be useful for further research.

The roles of the researchers who participated in the analysis
Teo Matković from the Institute for Social Research and Tihomir Žiljak on behalf of the Public Open University Zagreb (POUZ) participated in this process. According to the project plan, the preparation, implementation and analysis of focus group results is the task of professionals from the Public Open University Zagreb. In this way, the professionals from POUZ drafted a transcript, performed the coding and compiled the basic findings of the held discussion. Teo Matković was involved in all phases of preparation and implementation with his suggestions, comments and elaborated proposals.