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On Underrepresented and Vulnerable Groups of Students:

Contributions to the Enhancement of the Social Dimension of Higher Education in Croatia

Authors:

Saša Puzić
Nikola Baketa
Branislava Baranović
Margareta Gregurović
Teo Matković
Mirta Mornar
Iva Odak
Josip Šabić

Ministry of Science and Education

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Saša Puzić

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Contents

1. INTRODUCTION 7

2. RESEARCH AIM AND PROBLEMS 10

3. LITERATURE REVIEW OF RECENT STUDIES ON UNDERREPRESENTED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS OF STUDENTS IN CROATIA 12

   3.1. Students whose parents have a lower level of education 14

   3.2. Students from lower-income families 16

   3.3. Female students in the technical field, male students in the humanities 17

   3.4. Mature students 17

   3.5. Students with children 18

   3.6. Students with disabilities 18

   3.7. Students who have completed vocational education 19

   3.8. Students who work while studying 20

   3.9. Students who commute to their place of study 21

   3.10. Students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans 21

   3.11. Students from the Roma minority 22

   3.12. LGBTQ+ students 23

   3.13. Students from alternative care systems 23

   3.14. Homeless students and students at risk of becoming homeless 24

   3.15. Students from rural areas, small towns and islands 24

   3.16. Students with asylum/refugee status 25

      Institutional aspects of vulnerability 25

   3.17. Part-time students 25

   3.18. Students of professional studies 25

4. ANALYSIS OF RECENT NATIONAL POLICIES AND STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN CROATIA RELATED TO THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION 28

   4.1. National-level policies 28

      4.1.1. Performance agreements 28

      4.1.2. Strategy of Education, Science and Technology 29

4.1.3. National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia 2019-2021 30

4.1.4. Operational Programme Efficient Human Resources (2014-2020), priority axis of education, and lifelong learning 30

4.2. Analysis of the strategic documents of Croatian HEIs 31

5. ANALYSIS OF THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF SELECTED UNDERREPRESENTED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS WITH A FOCUS ON RECOGNISING OBSTACLES TO STUDYING 50

5.1. Research methodology 50

5.1.1. Study limitations 51

5.2. Results 52

5.2.1. Students from the Roma minority 52

5.2.2. Students with asylum/refugee status 65

5.2.3. LGBTQ+ students 76

5.2.4. Students from alternative care systems 85

5.2.5. Female students in the technical field 96

5.2.6. Male students in the humanities 103

5.2.7. Students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans 110

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS WITH RECOMMENDATIONS 118

6.1. Literature review of recent studies on underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students in Croatia 118

6.2. Analysis of recent national policies and strategic documents of higher education institutions in Croatia related to the social dimension of higher education 119

6.3. Analysis of the student experience of selected underrepresented and vulnerable groups with a focus on recognising obstacles to studying 120

6.4. Recommendations 123

7. LITERATURE 128

Links to documents 131

8. APPENDICES 135

Appendix 1.
Protokol za fokus grupe s podzastupljenim i ranjivim skupinama studenata 135

Appendix 2.
Interview guideline for focus groups with underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students 137

1.

INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary understanding of higher education implicitly includes its social dimension, which means that higher education should be publicly available to all, regardless of their social background, ethnicity, sexual orientation or, for example, certain physical limitations (National Plan, 2019). In contrast, numerous studies (e.g. Hauschildt et al., 2018), as well as European and national strategic documents (e.g. Yerevan Communique, 2015; Paris Communique, 2018; National Plan, 2019) suggest that this is not the case, or rather that – to paraphrase some of these documents – the student population that enrols and completes higher education most often does not reflect the diversity of our societies (Paris Communique, 2018), with vulnerable groups of students unable to finish their studies "without obstacles related to their social and economic background" (London Communique, 2007).

What this means in practice is that there are inequalities in higher education that can manifest through different forms of exclusion of vulnerable groups of students, who are marginalised and treated as irrelevant to the educational practice (Lynch and Baker, 2005; Hinton-Smith et al., 2018). This situation is explained by the fact that students from vulnerable groups often stand outside the dominant discourse, and thus remain "invisible" in the educational everyday life that is shaped by institutional procedures and practices (Reay et al., 2001). In this way, their unequal position is reinforced, as vulnerable groups often lack certain opportunities and resources that are taken for granted within the higher education system. Ultimately, the lack of opportunities and resources, as well as the failure of institutions to recognise these disadvantages, can manifest in poorer academic achievements and more frequent drop-outs of students from vulnerable groups (Ellis, 2009; Quinn, 2013). The described process of excluding students from vulnerable groups can therefore be understood as a result of the interaction between institutional and personal factors that influence the educational "behaviour" and constrain successful studying (cf. Doolan et al., 2015).

It is important to emphasise that addressing the obstacles faced by students from vulnerable groups implies that the equality of opportunities in higher education cannot be reduced solely to providing formal access to higher education, but that it requires a clear articulation of "real options" available to different groups of students (Lynch and Baker, 2005), which, ultimately, determine their educational success. The basic requirement for this is the identification of relevant groups of students, as well as the general factors that contribute to their under-representation and/or vulnerability. When it comes to Croatian higher education, this first step was taken with the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia 2019-2021 (National Plan, 2019), which identified a total of eighteen underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students[1]. The term "vulnerability" was defined as "a higher 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). This definition of vulnerability corresponds to the assumption that, throughout their studies, students from vulnerable and underrepresented groups are faced with specific obstacles that are related to their social positions and identities. Recognising these obstacles is the basic precondition for strengthening the social dimension of higher education, i.e. expanding the "real options" for successful study and graduation. That is why the focus of this study is on gaining a deeper insight into the student experience in order to identify relevant obstacles that arise from their belonging to a vulnerable group. To this end, the authors analysed the data collected through focus groups and interviews with the selected underrepresented

[1] According to the National Plan (2019), these are: students whose parents have a lower level of education, students from lower-income families, female students in the technical field and 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, students who are homeless and 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.

and vulnerable groups of students. As it was technically impossible to cover all eighteen groups defined by the National Plan, we focused on some hitherto less-researched groups: students who are refugees and asylum seekers, students from the Roma minority, LGBTQ+ students, students from alternative care systems, female students in the technical field, male students in the humanities, and students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans.

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

2.

RESEARCH AIM AND PROBLEMS

2. RESEARCH AIM AND PROBLEMS

The aim of this study was to conduct an empirical analysis of the conditions and assumptions for enhancing the social dimension of higher education in the Republic of Croatia.

In line with this research aim, the following research problems have been identified:

- What are the recent findings on underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students in Croatia?
- How do the recent national policies and strategic documents of universities, polytechnics and colleges address the social dimension of higher education?
- What is the study experience of students from the selected underrepresented and vulnerable groups?
- What are the reasons for a more difficult study experience or potential exclusion from the higher education system of students from underrepresented and vulnerable groups?
- What are the study-related needs of students from underrepresented and vulnerable groups?

3.

LITERATURE REVIEW OF RECENT STUDIES ON UNDERREPRESENTED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS OF STUDENTS IN CROATIA

3.1. Students whose parents have a lower level of education
3.2. Students from lower-income families
3.3. Female students in the technical field, male students in the humanities
3.4. Mature students
3.5. Students with children
3.6. Students with disabilities
3.7. Students who have completed vocational education
3.8. Students who work while studying
3.9. Students who commute to their place of study
3.10. Students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans
3.11. Students from the Roma minority
3.12. LGBTQ+ students
3.13. Students from alternative care systems
3.14. Homeless students and students at risk of becoming homeless
3.15. Students from rural areas, small towns and islands
3.16. Students with asylum/refugee status
Institutional aspects of vulnerability
3.17. Part-time students
3.18. Students of professional studies

3. LITERATURE REVIEW OF RECENT STUDIES ON UNDERREPRESENTED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS OF STUDENTS IN CROATIA

This review builds on the document "Under-represented and vulnerable groups in higher education in the Republic of Croatia", published as an appendix to the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia 2019-2021, written in 2016 by the National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education. This document provided an overview of findings on the aspects of underrepresentation and vulnerability for eighteen student groups. The intention behind this desktop research is to systematically build on its foundation and show the progress of knowledge on the approach and challenges of participating in education with regard to all originally stated characteristics.

To this end, we have conducted a search of scientific papers and reports published between 2016 and early 2020. The search initially identified a number of papers and studies that (a) referred to papers that pertain to Croatia and were cited in the original overview, (b) were written by authors cited in the original overview, and (c) were written in Croatian or published in Croatian scientific journals that contained the name of a particular group or aspect of vulnerability in the title, keywords or the summary. If the papers found by using this criterion contained new empirical insights on the approach or the representation of a particular group in higher education, those findings were summarised in this review. This process was conducted iteratively.

In this way, we identified a total of 28 references that originally introduce new insights into one or more underrepresented or vulnerable groups in higher education in the Republic of Croatia. Among them, there are multiple studies based on research organised by the National Centre for External Evaluation of Education, as well as the national Eurostudent VI publication. Unfortunately, at the time of writing of this study, the data from the 2019 Eurostudent VII research has not yet been published.

Table 1: Overview of the identified new and relevant references by topic and year of publication (2016-2019)

Year	Reference	Students whose parents have a lower level of education	Students from lower income families	Female students in technical fields, 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	LGBTQ+ students	Students from alternative care systems	Homeless students and students at risk of becoming homeless	Students from rural areas, small towns and islands	Students with asylum/refugee status	Part-time students	Students of professional studies
2016	Klepač, 2016															X			
	Vučković Juroš and Tokić Milaković, 2016		X																

Year	Reference	Students whose parents have a lower level of education	Students from lower income families	Female students in technical fields, 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	LGBTQ+ students	Students from alternative care systems	Homeless students and students at risk of becoming homeless	Students from rural areas, small towns and islands	Students with asylum/refugee status	Part-time students	Students of professional studies
2017	Bošković, Ilić-Stošović and Skočić-Mihić, 2017						X												
	Franz, Branica and Urbanc, 2017													X					
	Goršić, 2017																X		
	Košutić, 2017		X																
	Kovač, 2017										X								
	Croatian Youth Network, 2017								X										
	Radović, Vejmelka and Družić Ljubotina, 2017		X																
	Salaj and Kiš-Glavaš, 2017						X												
	Salaj, 2017						X												
	Spajić Vrkaš and Potočnik, 2017	X	X					X	X										
2018	Ćosić, 2018			X															
	Doolan, Puzić and Baranović, 2018	X																	
	Klarin, Šimić Šašić and Sučić Šantek, 2018						X												
	Kovač and Jurajda, 2018										X								
	Kunac, Klasnić and Lalić, 2018											X							
	Pažur Aničić, Šimić and Divjak, 2018																		X
	Rogošić, 2018																	X	
	Rubil, Stubbs and Zrinščak, 2018		X																
	Urbanc, Sladović Franz and Branica, 2018													X					
2019	Agency for Science and Higher Education, 2019																		X
	Bandalović, Šuljug Vučica and Gvozdenović, 2019								X										
	Jokić, 2019							X											
	Odak and Puzić, 2019	X																	
	Rimac, Bovan and Ogresta, 2019 (Eurostudent VI)	X			X	X	X	X							X			X	
	Ristić Dedić, 2019															X			
	Šabić, 2019							X											
	Total references on the group:	4	5	1	1	1	5	4	3	0	2	1	0	2	1	2	1	2	2

Note: Full references can be found in the bibliography.

Given the dynamics of scientific publication, all the papers presented here are based on research conducted before the adoption of the National Plan in 2018, and many before the publication of the original overview document titled "Under-represented and vulnerable groups in higher education in the Republic of Croatia". These references were also included in the review if they were published after the previous review document, so as not to leave out the relevant contributions that were published in the meantime. Therefore, all the findings are presented together with the information they are based on and the year that research was conducted. Since all the original data pre-dates the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension in Higher Education, this review should be understood as a refresher of insights into the basic condition at the time when the National Plan was initiated, and not as an assessment of changes that took place during its implementation.

Before presenting the updated findings, it should be noted that the presented knowledge on the representation and vulnerability of individual groups is not the result of a "natural" state, but of the current system of support for these groups, as well as the entire ecosystem of educational and social policies in effect in the Republic of Croatia. Also, the chosen groups do not represent strictly separate categories, because individual aspects of vulnerability are often interconnected, and individuals can be characterised by vulnerability according to multiple categories. Thus, for example, the categories of students whose parents have a lower level of education and a lower socioeconomic status largely overlap, and these categories also include the majority of young people from the Roma community. Their opportunities for accessing higher education are largely determined by the type of secondary education – mostly vocational – which they previously attended. Also, there is a big overlap between the group of mature students, students with children and employed students (who usually study on a part-time basis). One should also consider the possibility of intersectionality, or rather the possibility that different aspects of vulnerability are mutually increased when occurring together. Some of the analyses summarised here simply show the observed challenges or differences between the groups, while others analyse the specific contribution of a particular aspect to the access to higher education, or rather to vulnerability in the context of higher education.

3.1. Students whose parents have a lower level of education

A survey on the wishes, plans and attitudes of Croatian high school students, carried out between October and December of 2017 on a subsample of 4,501 students of the final grades of secondary school programmes that enable them to take the State Matura exam, found major differences in the stated intention to continue on to higher education, which correlated with the parents' level of education (Odak and Puzić, 2019). Thus, among the students of the final fourth or fifth grade, the intention of enrolling into higher education was expressed by 93.4% of students with highly educated fathers and mothers, 88.8% of students with one highly educated parent, 80.7% of students whose both parents have high school education (and who make up 45% of all students), and 68.2% of students with only one high school educated parent. Considering the parents' level of education, these differences are much smaller among students of general high school programmes (between 92.7% and 96.7% intend to continue on to higher education), but also among the students of vocational programmes (53.9%, 65.3%, 73.4% and 73.0% respectively), which means that a significant part of the difference stems from a compositional effect, i.e. a higher representation of children of less educated parents in vocational programmes: while 66.5% of children in four- and five-year vocational programmes do not have a single highly-educated parent, the same is the case for 39.1% of children in general secondary school programmes. The parents' level of education corresponds to a linear rise in the confidence in a successful passing of the State Matura, and the enrolment and completion of a desired study programme. Although there are no significant differences in the use of formal sources of information on higher education, and lower awareness of enrolment is displayed only by students with at most one parent with secondary education, students with highly educated parents are more likely to use study-related information that

has been provided by somebody close to them, which points to the role of social and cultural capital in getting information on higher education. We should mention that this analysis did not include one-fifth of the generation attending three-year vocational education, which has the highest number of students of a lower socioeconomic status whose path to accessing the State Matura and higher education is extremely challenging even on a formal level.

A study conducted between April and June 2013 on 2,000 young people between the ages of 15-29 also found that their assessments of the key foreign language competences were linearly related to the parents' level of education (Spajić Vrkaš and Potočnik, 2017), which may hinder the continuation of education and especially the experience of international mobility.

When it comes to individuals who had aspirations and who overcame the obstacles to enrolment, relevant insights were gained from the 2016 Eurostudent VI survey.

This survey did not show a high prevalence of social reproduction in the form of enrolment of children in the same study as their parents (3%), and no stratification was found among those enrolled in the form of a statistically significant bias in choosing a university, polytechnic or college with regard to their parents' level of education (Rimac et al., 2019: 33).

In the aspect of housing, students whose parents have a lower educational attainment are somewhat more likely to be placed in student dormitories, but also in rented accommodation, i.e. less often in their own or parental apartment, which indicates the need for housing subsidies according to the socioeconomic status, or rather shows that subventions are inadequate (Rimac et al., 2019: 44–45).

Furthermore, students whose parents have primary education are permanently employed in 54% of cases, unlike the 22% of children of highly educated parents (Rimac et al., 2019: 67).

The cost of studies for children of parents with secondary and higher education are similar, except for a higher debt burden of the former, while children of parents with lower education achievements have lower study costs (Rimac et al., 2019: 66–67). This differs from the findings of the previous wave of Eurostudent 2012 surveys, which showed that the costs of children of less educated parents were slightly higher (mostly due to loans), and the costs of children of parents with secondary education lower. Such results require additional analyses and comparisons based on the original data.

In the Eurostudent VI survey, the experiences and intentions of studying abroad remained strongly linked to parental education, just as in the previous 2014 survey (Rimac et al., 2019: 91–92).

Differences in the estimation of post-graduation prospects on the labour market, which were identified in an earlier study, were not present in the 2016 survey (Rimac et al., 2019: 86).

A detailed analysis of funding sources from the 2016 Eurostudent VI found that scholarships, especially national ones (Ministry of Science and Education (MSE), national non-refundable sources) are more often received by students whose parents have a lower level of education, especially primary education (Rimac et al., 2019: 72 -73), which indicates a successful targeting of scholarships, although the number of students who receive such scholarship still represents a minority. Unfortunately, this is not visible when it comes to financial assistance instruments for students provided by higher education institutions, which are guided solely by the metric of study success (Rimac et al., 2019: 94).

Finally, based on a half-century review of literature on social inequalities in access to higher education since the 1960s, and the statistics on the educational structure of students' parents between 2001 and 2011, Doolan et al. (2018) state that, despite an increase in overall participation in higher education, the differences in the continuation of studies, in choosing the type (vocational or university) and place of study (Zagreb or other universities) with regard to the social status and the parents' education proved to be relatively constant through generations. According to the authors, this puts the Croatian system of higher education among the more socially-exclusive, which the authors attribute to a stratified secondary education with elite general secondary education programmes, and the reproduction of class-implied

educational paths that are characteristic for a particular habitus. Inequalities have persisted (in the period observed by the authors, i.e. up to 2011/12) despite interventions at the level of higher education system aimed at financial compensation of unprivileged students through (co)funding the costs of food, tuition, housing or scholarships during the study. However, it should be noted that, during the 2010s, the alocation of scholarships and dormitory criteria were more focused on the criterion of need and less based on success, as indicated by the shifts that were observed within the subsequent Eurostudent studies.

3.2. Students from lower-income families

In recent years, a number of studies have been published on access to higher education from the perspective of poverty and the economic status.

A 2016 study, conducted on 207 households with children growing up in poverty (Rubil et al., 2018) yielded encouraging findings that 42% of parents of children who receive the guaranteed minimum benefits believe that their children should receive higher education (although a significant proportion are sceptical that they will succeed), while 31% of the surveyed primary school students from this group expect to obtain higher education.

Accordingly, based on three focus groups that were done in 2015 with 21 high school students from families that benefited from guaranteed minimum benefits in poorer or richer communities, several actors highlighted access to higher education as a way out of poverty, but also the problem of a lack of funds for schooling and studying, and the impossibility of choosing a school and education programme according to their interest and talents because schools were chosen according to "spatial accessibility", especially in poorer communities (Radović et al., 2017).

The importance of economic factors for the continuation of education is also indicated by the results of a 2013 survey of 2,000 young people in which, out of 25.1% of young people who dropped out or intended to drop out of school, 47% (or 11.9% of all interviewees) cited financial difficulties as the reason. This was the most common reason for all groups, but was especially prevalent among young people from households with lower parental education and a household income below 8,000 HRK (Spajić Vrkaš and Potočnik, 2017: 107).

According to a 2015 study conducted within the ESF project "Educational Outcomes and Careers of Young People Raised in Poverty" on 105 young people (aged 18-29), who were recipients of social assistance during high school for at least three years (Vučković Juroš and Tokić Milaković, 2016), a total of 33% of participants were studying or had successfully completed their studies. The study found a slight positive correlation between positive educational outcomes and educational resources, and objects and practices of high culture in the household, a somewhat stronger association of extracurricular activities with study attendance, and a negative relation between parental involvement during primary school and study participation (it is likely that this engagement was of a compensatory nature).

The role of cultural capital in educational aspirations in the context of socioeconomic status was analysed by Košutić (2017), on the basis of a 2014 survey of 534 final grade students from 18 high schools in Zagreb and the Zagreb County. The analysis established the connection between material cultural capital (books, educational resources) and grades. However, the expectations of enrolment in professional study programmes proved to be connected with lower school success, the attendance of vocational secondary schools, higher material cultural capital and the expectation of higher education, while the expectations of enrolment in university studies proved to be related to higher levels of embodied cultural capital (cultural practices, extracurricular activities, reading), higher secondary school achievement, the attendance of general high school programmes and the expectation of higher education. It is interesting that analytical models that take into account the above-mentioned factors did not determine a distinct

contribution of parental cultural capital, socioeconomic status or parental education to the expectation of enrolment.

3.3. Female students in the technical field, male students in the humanities

According to the data of the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (CBS) that have been combined by Eurostat (Eurostat, 2020), the representation of men and women in certain ISCED educational areas in higher education has been stable in recent years, with women making up 56.5 – 57% of the total student body between 2013 and 2018. This source also allows for a more precise identification of areas with a feminized and masculinized student population. With the exception of the field of education in which 87% of students are female students, segregation is not so high at the level of general areas of arts and humanities (67%), nor in social sciences in general (72%), while engineering study programmes have 28%, and the ICT has 22% of female students. The differences are much more pronounced at the level of detailed areas of study, where the share of female students in the study exceeds 80% in the areas of preschool and primary education, language, literature and linguistics, psychology, biochemistry, food industry, nursing, pharmacy and social work. On the other hand, girls make up less than 20% of the student body only in the engineering subfields of education related to electricity and energy, electronics and automation, mechanics and metalworking, and vehicles, ships and aircraft.

The experience of studying in a gender-atypical study programme was studied and discussed by only one paper published during the observed period. The research was done on the study programme of social pedagogy, which was chosen as an exemplary study of supporting professions in which male students make up only 7 - 8% of enrolled students, and was conducted in early 2016 in the form of focus groups with 13 full-time students (Ćosić, 2018). Students enrolled in this study because of their interests and motivation for the field, as well as positive experiences with members of that profession. They recognize the greater propensity of men to give up, and the greater focus of women on educational success and achievement. No negative experiences of male students have been identified, but there is an impression of expectations and even pressure from teachers and female colleagues on special participation or reflection of male colleagues. There is an experience of positive discrimination, and greater sensitivity that students interpret as an adaptation to a feminized social environment, including sensitivity to gender differences. Students describe their own and the surprise of the environment with the level of the feminization of studies, and express a desire for gender balance, but not at the expense of equal enrolment criteria. Although gender characteristics are not considered crucial, there is a perception of men's advantages in working directly with users (lower user aggression), especially with adults and in the prison system, as well as in employment in the profession. In the period between 2016 and 2019, no quantitative research or research on the experience of female students in gender-typical male studies has been found.

3.4. Mature students

Eurostudent IV-VI surveys give an indication of the stable age structure of the student body. In the period 2010-2016, covered by these three waves of research, the share of students who enrolled in the first degree after the age of 20 increased slightly from 8.0% to 9.3%. Such students are more likely to enrol in polytechnics and colleges, and study as part-time students.

It should be noted that the Eurostudent VI survey showed that students who enrolled in higher education at 21 years of age or later did not show a lower commitment to graduation and completion of studies than students who enrolled at a younger age (Rimac et al., 2019: 84).

3.5. Students with children

Within the Eurostudent VI (2016) survey, students with children made up only 1.2% of students under the age of 30, but as many as 51.3% of students aged 31-55. Those same students are also frequently employed on a permanent basis (61.5%) (Rimac et al., 2019: 34).

The Eurostudent VI data on student-parents' experiences and intentions to study abroad are even more unfavourable than in the 2014 survey: 0.3% have had such experience, and 3.5% intend to do it, while two years earlier 10% expressed such intention (Rimac et al., 2019: 91–92).

3.6. Students with disabilities

Based on the data of the Eurostudent VI (2016) survey, it seems that the share of students who reported difficulties was slightly reduced compared to the previous surveys (2010: 15%, 2014: 14%, 2016: 10.8%), with relative representation of difficulties remaining stable. In the 2016 wave of research, 0.8% of students indicated that these difficulties were seriously limiting in their daily activities and studies, while an additional 1.3 - 1.4% expressed significant limitations in this regard. In terms of the quality of support, 2% had a negative experience, and 1.2% of all participants believed that this support was sufficient (Rimac et al., 2019: 35), which is slightly more favourable than the estimates from the previous Eurostudent studies (where 27% of students with disabilities claimed that the support was not of good quality at all, and 5% that it was of good quality). These students still had a somewhat lower perception of the quality of teaching and the organization of studies (Rimac et al., 2019: 83).

In the 2013 study of the academic, emotional and social adjustment of students with disabilities to higher education (Bošković et al., 2017), which included 64 students with disabilities from Croatia and Serbia, 83% of participants stated that health difficulties hindered their studies, and 75% that they would not have been able to study successfully without family support. Nevertheless, students with disabilities achieved the same results in the academic and social adjustment as students from the general population, but showed a somewhat weaker emotional adjustment. The findings of the regression analysis indicated the importance of independent housing, family support and social status for the adjustment of students with disabilities, and the potential importance of professional support policies in these dimensions.

The study on the perception of the implementation of educational policies from the perspective of 30 high school students and 30 students with disabilities (Salaj, 2017), based on focus groups conducted in 2014 and 2015, did not separate the findings of high school and university students, but indicated the heterogeneity of their experiences and approaches, limited knowledge of educational policies, desire to be involved in the process, and the low bargaining power of young people with disabilities. High school and university students singled out the lack of knowledge, time, contacts and support as factors that limit their participation in decision-making, which is why they achieved a relatively narrow participation that was mainly aimed at solving their own problems, channelled through the roles and powers of experts, bodies and organizations. The author recommended designing institutional mechanisms for increasing participation, strengthening the curriculum that would enable student participation, and increasing the bargaining power of actors and organizations of students with disabilities.

As part of the same study, in 2016 researchers mapped the space of deliberations of 15 students with disabilities on their own role in the implementation of educational policies using the Q methodology (Salaj and Kiš-Glavaš, 2017). Given the heterogeneity of students with disabilities, there are more areas in which their opinions differed than the ones in which they agreed. Thus the results identified three dominant perspectives: silent and passive actors (who need to be empowered and educated to act), influential actors (who possess the knowledge, skills, motivation, and a certain degree of power to influence), and isolated actors (who recognize their own needs, but also their impotence and the inadequacy of the system to effect the needed changes). The only common ground is the rejection of

favouritism and making concessions to students on the basis of their disability in favour of advocating adaptation, which requires changes in attitudes on the part of those who implement educational policies (primarily teachers). Based on the provided testimonies, the authors concluded that empowerment for advocacy and greater representation in the space of public policy could result from improved knowledge and negotiation skills among students, and better connections among themselves and with other stakeholders.

The experience of studying with a disability is largely determined by the perception of other students, which is why a recent study on the social distance of students to people with disabilities, conducted at the University of Zadar (Klarin et al., 2018), is indicative. The findings of this study show that the majority of students identify persons with motor impairments (93%), visual (80%) and hearing impairments (76%) as people with disabilities, around half of respondents thusly identify persons with mental disabilities (52%), and a significant minority would say that people with chronic illness (41%) or learning difficulties (36%) are persons with disabilities. When it comes to social distance toward such people, its modal value is at the level of friends, with frequent occurrences of a minimal distance (except for people with motor impairments and especially with mental difficulties, where the distance is often greater). Also, in according with contact hypothesis, the study indicates that the distance is smaller if students have people with disabilities as colleagues and/or friends.

3.7. Students who have completed vocational education

A study on the wishes, plans and attitudes of Croatian high school students, conducted on 13,301 students in 4- and 5-year secondary school programmes (which allow them to take the State Matura exam) between October and December 2017, found significantly lower aspirations to higher education among students of vocational schools than among students of general secondary school programmes (71.8% vs. 97.3%), and a greater tendency to taking a year off after high school (12.8% vs. 3.7%). Vocational school students are also, on average, somewhat less convinced that they will pass the State Matura, and enrol or complete the desired study. Although there was only a small difference in the students' feeling of being informed about the transition to higher education, the results indicate a greater lag of vocational school students in the actual knowledge about that transition. Finally, when asked about the factors involved in choosing higher education, students of vocational schools are less likely to state personal interest in a specific field, and more frequently cite the ease of enrolling in a study programme, proximity to the place of study, or the wishes of friends (Jokić, 2019). These findings indicate that, even before starting the application procedure and the State Matura, there is a difference in the aspirations of vocational school students and the information they possess about higher education enrolment, which in itself limits this group's access in relation to general secondary school students. However, it is also necessary to take into account the different levels of knowledge, abilities, resources and family support that these two groups possess, which are likely to inform their aspirations just like they informed their prior enrolment in vocational secondary education.

Indications of the aspirations of three-year vocational school students can be ascertained from the results of a youth survey conducted between April and June 2013, which included a subsample of 511 high school students. According to this study, 19% of young people attending a three-year vocational school had plans to continue their education, while this was the case for 60% of students from four-year vocational schools, and 86% of general secondary school students. Students of four-year vocational schools, and especially general secondary school students, were also more likely to plan to continue their education abroad, and less likely not to think about plans after high school (Spajić Vrkaš and Potočnik, 2017: 123). Also, young people who had completed three-year vocational schools assessed their competence in foreign languages less favourably than those who had completed four-year schools (Spajić Vrkaš and Potočnik, 2017), which could make it difficult to continue their education, and especially to gain the experience of international mobility.

When it comes to the changes in patterns over the past years, a recent analysis of State Matura data between 2010 and 2017 (Šabić, 2019) indicates a declining trend in the share of cohorts of students from major vocational fields who successfully passed the State Matura in the summer examination period. Thus, a decrease was detected in the field of electrical engineering (from 73% to 65%), economy (from 79% to 67%), catering and tourism (from 73% to 60%), and health (67% to 57%), while the share of the cohort of students from vocational fields in mechanical engineering remained at a stable low (change from 52% to 51%). In the same period, the share of general secondary school students who successfully passed the Matura exam remained stable (e.g. went from 96% to 95% in general secondary school programmes). This explicitly speaks to the reduced possibility of enrolment for the population of high school graduates from vocational programmes.

When it comes to the study experience itself, the Eurostudent VI research found that there is no difference in the costs of students coming from vocational and general secondary schools, as well as those who have acquired their qualification outside of Croatia (Rimac et al, 2019: 66) - but that there is a difference in their resources. With regard to public sources of funding, the lag in the frequency of awarding scholarships to students with previous vocational secondary education was reduced compared to the previous 2014 Eurostudent survey. Also, the majority (of a very small number) of students who enrolled in higher education after three-year vocational schools and a differential exam applied for some form of scholarship (Rimac et al., 2019: 74), which was probably a prerequisite for being able to study in the first place.

3.8. Students who work while studying

According to the 2016 Eurostudent VI survey database, only 34% of students did not do any paid work in the year before, 23% worked in between teaching periods, while 26% worked full-time and 16% part-time during the semester. The proportion and structure of students who worked during the semester did not prove to be different from previous waves of research.

However, 70% of students who were regularly employed in 2016 spent more than 20 hours a week (an average of 32 hours) at work. Accordingly, 58% of students who worked longer than 20 hours per week identified themselves primarily as employees, and only secondly as students (which was the case with only 7% of students who worked less than 20 hours a week).

As for the reasons for working during their studies, three quarters of participants stated that they were working in order to cover the cost of living. It is important to note that 44% of students agreed with the statement that, without a paid job, they could not afford to be students (this was the case with half of professional studies students). However, in 66% of cases, working students also said that gaining experience in professional work was one of the reasons for working. For 35% of students who worked, their jobs were not related to the field of study at all, while 27% said that they were closely related.

Consistent with the Eurostudent data are the findings of a youth survey conducted between April and June 2013. Here, a subsample of 536 students yielded 70.7% of students who worked during their studies, of which 14.5% worked during their entire or almost entire studies. Full-time students who did not pay tuition were somewhat less likely to work, and permanent employment was present in one fifth of students of graduate and professional studies, as well as in 30% of part-time students (Spajić Vrkaš and Potočnik, 2017: 130).

A more recent analysis of a survey conducted between July and August 2019 on 216 full-time students of the University of Split who had worked during the past year (Bandalović et al., 2019) indicated that 95% of respondents worked due to an unfavourable financial situation, but that 75% of them were also motivated to gain new experiences and knowledge. Around half of them reported earnings that were close to the minimum hourly rate, 38% were not satisfied with the hourly rate they received, and

48% stated that students had fewer labour rights than other workers. Furthermore, 24% of employed students thought that their work affected their study success, and 20% that they would have had better study success if they did not work.

The findings of the survey are consistent with the analysis of student work in the document published by the Croatian Youth Network (Mreža mladih Hrvatske, MMH) in 2017 (MMH, 2017). This document presented the administrative data for 2016 which showed that, out of 122,972 students, 84,417 (68.7%) worked on a student contract for an average amount of 13,548 HRK, which is equivalent to four months of full-time work for a minimum hourly rate. An analysis of job ads that appeared in the Student Centre found that student work was sought in many areas, most often in telemarketing and customer support, but also in services, sales and secretarial work, which could mean that they were sought as substitutes for full-time employees or that employers were avoiding new full-time hires. Student workers were often wanted for long-term, full-time engagements or for internships lasting at least one year, while advertisements for jobs that could be understood as learning a profession in the workplace were very rare. This type of contract lacks most of the social security instruments that arise from employment (pensionable service, sick leave), and are characterized by unregulated occupational health and safety, uncertain payment and duration of work, and the absence of a minimum hourly rate. The Student Affairs Act, passed in late 2018 (OG 96/2018), regulates the minimum hourly rate for student work at the level of the minimum wage, introduces instruments of supervision, payment insurance and occupational safety, and enables student work to part-time students (as long as they earn at least 1 ECTS credit per year). For now, there are no analytical contributions that would document the effect of these changes on student work.

3.9. Students who commute to their place of study

In the observed period, no papers were identified that thematised the representation or aspects of vulnerability of this group within the student body.

3.10. Students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans

Two extremely thorough studies, based on related microdata of the Register of Croatian Homeland War Veterans, e-Matica, the State Matura and the Croatian Health Insurance Fund, have greatly contributed to the understanding of the educational outcomes of children from this group.

When it comes to the children of deceased veterans (Kovač, 2017), the current support system has resulted in a -0.13 lower high school average of such children compared to the children of veterans from the same unit who attend the same school, but this lower success was determined for male children only. However, both male and female children were found to have slightly more frequent absences, poorer grades for behaviour, and more frequent childhood injuries. A similar adverse effect on grades was found for children of veterans with 100% disability, but not for children of veterans with a lower disability level. In addition, a stronger effect was identified in children whose fathers died before they were born than in those who spent part of their childhood with their father.

Another paper investigated the effect of veteran fathers' suicide on children's educational outcomes (Kovač and Jurajda, 2018). Here, after controlling the outcome for other factors, the children of Croatian veterans who committed suicide were found to have a -0.18 lower success in the secondary school, more absences, poorer behaviour and a -0.16 lower results at the State Matura than children of veterans from the same units who did not commit suicide. In children born after the war, there was no negative effect on behaviour or success at the State Matura, and there was a smaller (but existing) difference in student absences and grade averages. All results were robust regardless of whether that parent volunteered to

join the war or not. Also, the difference between the children whose war veteran fathers died of other causes or committed suicide was determined only in the State Matura exams, where the children of fathers who committed suicide achieved a -0.13 lower average.

One should bear in mind that such noticeable, but relatively small effects have been found in the context of historically available instruments of support for Croatian war veterans and members of their families. Today, the youngest children of deceased and missing veterans are at least 25 years old, and thus mostly outside the age of attending regular education (but not lifelong learning). However, the support system remains relevant because, in case of 100% disabled veterans of the Homeland War as well as veterans who committed suicide, there is still a certain number of school-age children. These findings, in which all war-related factors are controlled (so that the effect can be interpreted primarily as parental loss or disability), also have significant implications on the support system for children who have lost a parent (or whose parent has lost their fitness to work) in circumstances other than war, for whom the support system is significantly less generous.

3.11. Students from the Roma minority

Within the project *Collection and Monitoring of Base Line Data for Effective Implementation of the National Roma Inclusion Strategy*, a 2017 survey was conducted on a representative sample of the Roma population that included 1,550 surveyed households from 118 localities and 281 participants in interviews and focus groups with representatives of the Roma community and the relevant institutions (Kunac et al., 2018). Much of this research was dedicated to education, and a separate publication - which will focus on the education of children, youth and women - is being prepared.

The study found a remarkable generational improvement in primary school attendance (in the age group between 14 to 18, only 20.5% of the cohort dropped out, compared to 40.4% aged 26 to 40), as well as a significant progress in secondary school attendance. However, in 2017, there were still only 43% of young Roma at the age of 16 who attended secondary school (39% of girls and 47% of boys). Among the reasons for dropping out, the dominant ones were financial reasons (24%), poor educational achievement (18%), and parenthood or marriage (26%, but 40% among girls and 7% among boys). Also, in the age group 19-25, 23% of the Roma had a three-year secondary education, 4% had a four-year education, and only 0.6% finished general secondary education, which means that only 5% of the cohort had the opportunity to access the State Matura, and thus higher education. Already in primary school, difficulties in mastering school obligations due to the lack of parents' human capital (education), cultural capital (education, language, prior knowledge) and economic capital (material conditions, social deprivation, poverty) are very noticeable, and these risk factors are transferred to higher levels of education, even in cases when that transition is successful.

When it comes to higher education, the qualitative segment of the same research (Kunac et al., 2018), members of the Roma community frequently detected an increased number of the Roma who studied or graduated from higher education institutions, as well as increased possibilities for scholarships for Roma students. In the survey segment of the research, there was a total of 19 participants who attended higher education (13 professional studies and 6 university studies), of which two had dormitory accommodation. If we compare this number with the sample size of the ages between 19-25, we can approximate the participation rate of the Roma in higher education to be 2.7%. Also, out of survey participants who were no longer in the education system, only 13 of them had completed their studies and 14 had dropped out, which indicates a high dropout rate (above 50%).

3.12. LGBTQ+ students

In the observed period, no papers were identified that thematised the representation or aspects of vulnerability of this group within the student body.

3.13. Students from alternative care systems

As a group, students from the alternative care were covered by two papers that have been published since the drafting of the National Plan, and which provide a significant contribution to the nature of the challenges this group faces. Both papers are based on a 2014 qualitative survey of 23 young people with experience of living and studying in the public care system. The first paper (Franz et al., 2017) explores the characteristics of studying, perceptions of self and others (peers), factors that facilitate study, and students' social network. What features prominently in this group's experience of studying is the fear of stigmatization (which is real, as is underestimation), with higher education being a potential mechanism for overcoming this stigma. The study experience is characterized by stressors, primarily those of a financial nature that result from a lack of parental support (financial, but usually also emotional), and frequent employment to cover the costs of studies, but also as a potential distraction. Compared to other students, alternative care students frequently perceive themselves as more independent, mature, self-confident, and resilient, but one should bear in mind that the subjects of this study represent a (self-)selected sub-population that earned the right to study. Regarding material support, the most important are financial scholarships (Social Welfare Centre, SWC), various foundations…), housing privileges (housing associations, direct enrolment in student dorms). In a broader context, students can get support from the relevant associations, SWC, SOS Children's Village, and on an individual level from foster parents, educators, teachers, bosses or former students from the care system. The personal social support network is often weaker, the most important family ties are usually those with brothers and (especially) sisters, and it is often the family that seeks support. Given these findings, Franz et al. (2017) point to the importance of life course prospects, initial barriers and educational choices (which are often limited by lower achievements), and note that ensuring greater access to higher education for young people from the public care system requires interventions that include (a) a set of material support, (b) individualized services, and (c) timely and complete information about these services, as well as (d) informing teachers and experts about the difficulties and needs of this group of students.

The same research also produced a second, complementary paper (Urbanc et al., 2018), which focuses on the provision of institutional support to students in the alternative care, and in addition to students includes experts and decision makers (5) as well as educators (11). From the students' perspective, the central problems are those of an existential nature such as the obligatory leaving of the care system (housing community) before the age of 21, or a timely receipt of benefits, and adequate information on the modalities and deadlines for exercising their rights. There is always a lot of pressure to fulfil study obligations on time, given the risk of losing all support if they do not master their studies without delay. They also see a problem in the fact that the support system is oriented exclusively to young people from the alternative care who enrol in higher education directly after high school. On the other hand, professionals generally do not think that the problem is in the system, but in the lack of assertiveness and awareness of students, while educators see their role primarily as providers of psycho-social support and the affirmation of values. This research has also resulted in concrete recommendations for supporting such students: the possibility of a six-month transition period in the community after the end of schooling and direct access to a student dorm for students, regular disbursement of benefits to avoid debt, positive discrimination, timely provision of information on all options, and discreet and early mentoring (by professors or students) that would provide motivation and support for enrolment and study. Professionals and especially educators value the great importance of support provided by counselling centres, especially confidential (online) support, as well as support for learning practical skills

and psychosocial help. At the same time, they suggest strengthening the support system, especially in terms of financial support and accommodation that should be provided until the end of studies and throughout the year - but at the same time they are wary of risks that could come from the possibility of "withdrawing" back to the alternative care they came from. Experts emphasize the importance of coordinating the system, and highlight the obligation to maintain contact and follow-up with the young people for three years after they leave the alternative care system, although educators do this informally.

Despite these valuable insights, there is still no systematic picture of the educational and working careers of young people from the alternative care (especially regarding their access to and success in higher education).

3.14. Homeless students and students at risk of becoming homeless

In the observed period, there were no specific studies on homeless students or those with inadequate living arrangements in Croatia, or rather on the access to higher education for children in such situations. Within the Eurostudent VI (2016) survey, the housing structure of students remained stable, with 48% of students still living with their parents (50% in 2012) and 10% in a student dormitory (8% in 2012) (Rimac et al., 2019: 40). This shows that a large proportion of students share the housing status of their parents, and a relatively small percentage use subsidized student housing resources. Data on the affordability and quality of housing are collected by the Eurostudent survey which, in 2016, showed that 9.1% of students expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of their housing, and 28.1% of them with the price.

3.15. Students from rural areas, small towns and islands

A survey on the wishes, plans and attitudes of Croatian high school students, conducted between October and December 2017 on a subsample of 4,497 students in the final grades of high school programmes that gave access to the State Matura exam, found moderate differences in the intention to attend higher education with regard to the location of the secondary school (Ristić Dedić, 2019). Thus, students from large cities and county centres more often expressed their intention to study (86.0% - 86.9%) than students from other, smaller cities (77.7%). However, no major or systematic differences were found in the factors of study programme selection or ways of getting information about the study with regard to the size of the place of education, while the expressed knowledge about the transition from secondary to higher education was weaker in Zagreb than in other cities. Moreover, estimates of a successful passing of the State Matura, as well as of the enrolment and completion of a desired study were somewhat more favourable among students in large cities (Zagreb, Split, Osijek, and Rijeka) than in other places.

According to the results of a survey conducted in 2014 (Klepač, 2016), high school students from rural areas of Slavonia intended to study to a lesser extent and had less expectation of finishing that study than their colleagues from the cities. The same study used bivariate analyses to find a significantly higher representation of vocational education in these environments (in less prestigious and poorly equipped schools), slightly lower student achievement, less family capital of every kind, weaker influence of parents and friends on decisions regarding higher education, and more frequent parents' expectation that students would start working after graduating from high school.

3.16. Students with asylum/refugee status

There are no empirical papers dealing with this group in the period covered by the review. The review paper on this group cites the conclusion of the Rector's Assembly on the "implementation of qualification exams for enrolment of asylum seekers in the first year of study and exemption from taking the State Matura", but not the possibility of enrolment in higher years of study on the basis of secondary evidence (Rector's Assembly, 2015, according to Goršić, 2017). The Act on International and Temporary Protection (OG 70/15, 127/17) does not define the inclusion of asylum seekers in higher education, while students with asylum/refugee status with approved status have formal rights to attend higher education under the same conditions as Croatian citizens.

Institutional aspects of vulnerability

3.17. Part-time students

In the Eurostudent VI survey, 47.5% of part-time students under the age of 30 and 92.8% over that age said that they were employed, which is in accordance with the assessment of the 2014 Eurostudent V survey (Rimac et al., 2019: 53–54). From these, 37.5% of students under 30 and 80.5% of students over 30 years of age were employed full time. Since late 2018, part-time students can also work on the basis of student contracts, which may affect the frequency or quality of employment for this group.

Furthermore, in 2016, part-time students continued to show a slightly lower perception of the quality of teaching and study organization (Rimac et al., 2019: 82), and talked about their experiences and intentions of studying abroad less often than full-time students, which is in line with the previous wave of research (Rimac et al., 2019: 91–92).

It should be noted that part-time students from the Eurostudent VI survey did not show a lower commitment to graduating than full-time students (Rimac et al., 2019: 84), but still saw their prospects in the labour market as somewhat less favourable.

A specific survey, conducted in 2016 on 400 undergraduate and graduate students of early and preschool education study programmes (Rogošić, 2018), found a statistically significant correlation between their age, employment and previous vocational school attendance and the status of part-time students, but no correlation with their high school grades.

3.18. Students of professional studies

A survey of student experiences of students enrolled in the academic year 2013/2014, conducted between October 2016 and January 2017 on a sample of 2,240 students (of which 1,061 finished the study), comparatively presented (but not statistically tested) the experiences of students of professional and university studies (ASHE, 2019). According to the results of this study, the experiences of professional study students in most domains of studying (with the exception of enrolment, extracurricular and research engagement) do not differ or are slightly more favourable than the experiences of university study students. However, this finding in favour of professional study students may stem from the responses of participants from private HEIs, which almost exclusively offer professional studies, or from higher expectations of university study students.

Another relevant recent insight into the experience of professional study students comes from the study on student employability (Pažur Aničić et al., 2018), which was based on a survey conducted between June and July 2017 on 5,493 students who had completed undergraduate, graduate or integrated studies during the academic year 2015/2016. Here too it was found that professional study

students more often had compulsory internships during their studies, but had less participation in the available additional activities (from working with teachers on research projects, being active in student associations and other organizations, both related or unrelated to the field of study, faculty bodies, and professional competitions) as well as mobility programmes (especially those of a longer duration). From an employability perspective, a similar employment rate within 6 months of graduation was found as for university study students: 76.6% versus 78.6% (primarily because 41.4% were already working at the time of graduation, compared to 27.8% students of university studies), but students of professional studies were somewhat less likely to find their first job in the profession (69.0% versus 81.4%), and more often used private contacts to find a job (which may be related to more internship experiences).

4.

ANALYSIS OF RECENT NATIONAL POLICIES AND STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN CROATIA RELATED TO THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

4.1. National-level policies

4.1.1. Performance agreements

4.1.2. Strategy of Education, Science and Technology

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

4.1.4. Operational Programme Efficient Human Resources (2014-2020), priority axis of education, and lifelong learning

4.2. Analysis of the strategic documents of Croatian HEIs

4. ANALYSIS OF RECENT NATIONAL POLICIES AND STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN CROATIA RELATED TO THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

4.1. National-level policies

For the purposes of analysing policies at the national level, we have selected four recent policies that are connected to creating and directing policies of HEIs with regard to the development of the social dimension. These are performance agreements which connected the public funding of HEIs and the achievement of various goals set before these institutions. In addition, there is the Strategy of Education, Science and Technology (Strategy, 2014), which has encompassed the entire system in order to transform and adapt it to contemporary challenges. The Strategy thus seeks to address important challenges in higher education, including the issue of the social dimension. The third policy is the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education and the accompanying documents (National Plan, 2019), and, finally, the fourth policy addressed here is the Operational Programme Efficient Human Resources (2014-2020), the priority axis of education and lifelong learning.

This covers the most important determinants of the social dimension in public policy at the national level in the last few years. A detailed overview of policies and interventions over a longer period of time is given in the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education.

4.1.1. Performance agreements

With the aim of ensuring that funding is based on agreed-upon strategic and programme goals, higher education institutions have signed performance agreements with the Ministry of Science and Education on three separate occasions. The first cycle of performance agreements was for the period of three academic years (2012/2013, 2013/2014 and 2014/2015), the second cycle included the next three academic years (2015/2016, 2016/2017 and 2017/2018), while the last was signed for a period of four academic years (2018/2019, 2019/2020, 2020/2021, and 2021/2022).

In the first cycle, performance agreements were signed with 21 public HEIs (seven universities and fourteen polytechnics and colleges). The HEIs were offered five general goals, and had to choose three of them. Two of the goals targeted specific vulnerable or underrepresented groups: the first was aimed at facilitating access to higher education and study support for students of lower socioeconomic status and students with disabilities, and the second at facilitating access to and ensuring the quality of studies for students over 25 years of age. The National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension (National Plan, 2019) stated that one of the general goals of the performance agreements, which contained the social dimension component, was aimed at acquiring qualifications in the period foreseen in the study programme. This goal applied to all students and did not explicitly target any of the vulnerable or underrepresented groups. According to the data from the National Plan, the goal connected with students of lower socioeconomic status and students with disabilities was chosen by eight out of 21 HEIs, and the goal related to students older than 25 by six of them. The goal related to the acquisition of qualifications in the period foreseen by the study programme was chosen by 11 HEIs.

In the second cycle, performance agreements were signed with 21 public HEIs (eight universities, and thirteen polytechnics and colleges). There were three general objectives defined, so there was no choice offered. The National Plan stated that two out of three objectives contained a social dimension. One was to ensure equal access to higher education for all full-time students in the Republic of Croatia, and the other was to encourage the completion of higher education. The third goal referred to the goals defined

by HEIs strategic documents, which gave them the opportunity to achieve the goals related to the social dimension if they defined them in these documents. Polytechnics and colleges also had a fourth goal that was not related to the social dimension. In addition, all HEIs had to use a certain share of funds to facilitate access to studies for students of lower socioeconomic status and students with disabilities.

In the last cycle of performance agreements, it was stated that the funds for programme funding were intended, among other things, for facilitating access to study for students of lower socioeconomic status and students with disabilities, and for student scholarships and rewards. Higher education institutions had autonomy in determining the criteria and models for the allocation of these funds within the activities listed as eligible. Unlike the previous cycle, this one did not mandate any defined shares of funds that had to be used for activities related to the social dimension.

The first cycle included a provision for a potential increase of 10% of total funds in case of positive results in the sense of achieving general and specific goals, but there were no penalties prescribed if those goals are not attained. In subsequent cycles, performance agreements did not feature such provisions, but it is not known if a comprehensive analysis of the achieved goals and the attainment of contractual obligations has been performed.

4.1.2. Strategy of Education, Science and Technology

The Strategy of Education, Science and Technology is based on the vision of Croatian society "in which high-quality education has a major impact on every individual's life, on relationships in society and on economic development. Croatian society will be democratic, tolerant and innovative, and every person's individuality will be able to fully develop" (Strategy, 2014: 23). This vision implies the strengthening of the social dimension because it promotes the importance of all individuals who should be allowed to achieve their educational aspirations, regardless of various life circumstances that potentially prevent them from doing so.

In the Strategy of Education, Science and Technology (Strategy, 2014), a separate goal was highlighted within the field of higher education, namely the improvement of the student standard, with special care for the social dimension of studying. This goal included five sub-goals - reform the student financial support system with the aim of achieving greater equity; develop a programme for improving the social dimension and analyse access and completion of underrepresented groups in higher education; expand accommodation opportunities for students, construct new and renovate existing facilities; ensure minimum standards of access to HEIs for students with disabilities; encourage activities and programmes for student participation in culture, sports and social events.

In addition to these sub-goals, a number of related measures have been developed that have the role of improving student standard and the social dimension. These measures are focused on activities related to data collection and monitoring within the system, building connections within the system, additional models of funding, and the development of infrastructure. The sub-goals are aimed at detecting the existing vulnerable and underrepresented groups, and one entire sub-goal is aimed at students with disabilities. Other groups are mentioned sporadically, e.g. when discussing the criteria for financial support and accommodation (socioeconomic status), and stimulating the studies of certain groups (the Roma).

According to the available data, there was no systematic work done on the monitoring of the achievement of these goals and measures at the system level, which is why we cannot talk about the level of achievement of the set goals.

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

The National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education has developed the *National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia 2019-2021* and the accompanying documents - *Guidelines for Enhancing the Support System for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia* and *Under-represented and Vulnerable Groups in Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia (National Plan, 2019)*. Within the framework of these documents, a number of underrepresented and vulnerable groups in Croatian higher education have been detected, thus opening the possibility of defining specific guidelines for improving their position. The detected 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.

Specific guidelines for improving their position have been developed only for students with disabilities, and include guidelines for enrolment, such as timely provision of information and priority in enrolment, and guidelines for actions to be taken during the studies, such as adjustment of teaching, peer support and accommodation. The goals of the National Plan itself mainly refer broadly to vulnerable and underrepresented groups, which are addressed further in the analysis, and specifically mention people with disabilities and the improvement of the system of part-time studies.

4.1.4. Operational Programme Efficient Human Resources (2014-2020), priority axis of education and lifelong learning

European Social Fund investments in the social dimension of higher education are explicitly located under investment priority *10.ii - Improving the quality and efficiency of, and access to, tertiary and equivalent education with a view to increasing participation and attainment levels, especially for disadvantaged groups*. Here, as part of the specific objective *10.ii.2. Increasing the attainment rates in higher education*, a direct award of HRK 321 million established the operation *Provision of scholarships to students from lower socioeconomic background*. This operation envisaged the provision of an additional 29,400 state scholarships to students of lower socioeconomic status in the period of five academic years (2017-2022), which would, together with state budget scholarships, reach the number of 10,000 state scholarships per year for students of lower socioeconomic status (List of operations under the Operational Programme Effective Human Resources 2014-2020, 2020). This is a generous, but the only operation in a seven-year operational programme that explicitly aims to contribute to the accessibility of higher education and the enhancement of the social dimension of higher education, as well as to increase the completion in higher education.

In higher education, there are no operations focused on the social dimension announced through open calls (tenders), but a significant number of such tenders have been announced at the pre-tertiary level, which can improve access to higher education for certain vulnerable groups. What stands out are three waves of tenders for providing teaching assistants to students with disabilities in pre-tertiary institutions (140 projects worth HRK 648 million), and support for the education of children and students belonging to the Roma national minority (9 projects worth HRK 8.4 million). These are the only two operations carried out under the specific objective *10.iii.1. Improving access to quality education at pre-tertiary levels for disadvantaged students*.

Conclusion

These four policies at the national level, which aim to improve the social dimension in higher education, indicate that the notion of the social dimension at this level, in terms of identifying underrepresented and vulnerable groups, has only been recently expanded, mostly through the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education. This expansion is obvious when one looks at the definition of target groups in the first performance agreements, where only three groups were identified, and the last one - the National Plan - which detected about twenty of them. Nevertheless, national policies place emphasis on several groups, primarily students with disabilities and students of lower socioeconomic status, which is evident from the allocations within the European Social Fund. In addition, the first-cycle performance agreements included goals related to mature students, but these were no longer included in performance agreement goals in the later cycles. Also, in terms of the obligations that HEIs have regarding the allocation of funds and specific activities, the goals related to students with disabilities and students of lower socioeconomic status have been defined ever more generally in each new cycle of performance agreements. Although the National Plan and the accompanying documents expanded the understanding of the social dimension, it should be emphasized that specific guidelines have been developed exclusively for students with disabilities, while other groups are mainly covered through the general objectives set out in the National Plan. It should definitely be noted that the analysed policies primarily deal with formal representation of certain goals and groups. Namely, in view of the lack of availability, or rather the non-existing evaluations of these policies, it is not possible to make broader conclusions on their implementation and the achievement of the desired changes.

4.2. Analysis of the strategic documents of Croatian HEIs

The aim of the analysis of HEIs' strategic documents was to determine the representation of topics related to the social dimension, and see whether the HEIs' objectives and the related measures or activities correspond to the objectives of the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia 2019-2021. It should be noted that the HEIs' strategic documents were mostly adopted in the period before the National Plan, and it was not expected that they refer to the specific objectives prescribed by the National Plan. However, such an analysis can show how HEIs approach the issues of the social dimension in relation to the National Plan, and open the possibility of defining goals when adopting new HEI strategic documents. It should be emphasised that no evaluation analysis has been conducted to determine whether HEIs have implemented the set goals or made additional decisions related to the social dimension. Strategic documents were chosen as reference because they define the direction of the institutions' development and the strategic goals that should be achieved in the course of that development.

The analysis covered only those HEIs for which strategic documents were available (Table 1). All included strategies are current with regard to the stated time frame, with the exception of the strategy of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek and the College of Inspection and Personnel Management, whose time frame was from 2013 to 2018. However, at the time when the materials were collected, these strategies were available on the HEI websites. In addition, it should be noted that some private HEIs publish only summaries or excerpts from their strategic documents, and that complete documents are not publicly available.

The analysis included 38 higher education institutions and 42 related strategic documents. Namely, the University of Zagreb has several strategies that cover various aspects of development such as student support, internationalization, sports, and studies and studying. Out of the 38 HEIs, there were 10 universities (eight public and two private), 16 polytechnics (11 public and 5 private), and 12 colleges (3 public and 9 private). From the time of the adoption of the strategic documents till today, two institutions have changed their legal status, but have retained their strategic documents as the basis for institutional development

(Polytechnic Pula College of Applied Sciences became the Istrian University of Applied Sciences, and the Zagreb School of Business changed its Croatian name from Visoka poslovna škola "Zagreb" to Poslovno veleučilište Zagreb). As many as 18 strategic documents expire in 2020, and nine more in the next two years, which provides an opportunity to consider new goals in terms of improving the social dimension.

Within the National Plan, six main goals and 33 sub-goals with related activities have been defined. Twenty-four of those sub-goals have HEIs listed as exclusively or partially responsible for their implementation. Based on this framework of goals, sub-goals and activities of the National Plan that are under the responsibility of HEIs, an attempt was made to detect the appropriate goals stated in the strategic documents of each HEI. These 24 sub-goals with associated activities formed the basis for the thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). Each of the 24 sub-goals was considered as a separate topic, which was the basis for the detection and coding of appropriate content in the HEIs' strategic documents for each individual topic. After the initial coding, each topic (sub-goal) was connected with the appropriate content from the HEIs' strategic documents and, where possible, specific solutions planned by the HEIs within that topic were grouped and described. Where it was not possible to group the HEIs' solutions, efforts were made to show the diversity of their approaches to a specific issue. Finally, based on the analysis of each individual topic (sub-goal), a summary overview of occurring topics and patterns was given.

Table 1. List of HEIs and associated strategic documents

HEI	Name of the document
University of Zagreb	Student Support Development Strategy of the University of Zagreb (2013 - 2025)
University of Zagreb	University of Zagreb's Internationalisation Strategy 2014 - 2025
University of Zagreb	Strategy of Spatial and Functional Development of the University of Zagreb 2013 - 2025
University of Zagreb	Sport Development Strategy of the University of Zagreb
University of Zagreb	Strategy of Studies and Studying of the University of Zagreb 2014 - 2025
Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek	Strategy of the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek 2011 - 2020
University of Zadar	Development Strategy of the University of Zadar 2017 - 2022
University of Split	Strategy 2015 - 2020
University of Rijeka	University of Rijeka Development Strategy 2014 - 2020
University of Dubrovnik	University of Dubrovnik Development Strategy 2016 - 2025
University North	University North Development Strategy 2015 - 2020

HEI	Name of the document
Juraj Dobrila University of Pula	Development Strategy of the Juraj Dobrila University of Pula 2016 - 2020
Catholic University of Croatia	Development Strategy of the Catholic University of Croatia during the Period up to 2020
RIT – Rochester Institute of Technology	Committed to Greatness, 2019 - 2022 Strategic Plan
Polytechnic of Međimurje in Čakovec	Development Strategy of the Polytechnic of Međimurje in Čakovec for the Period 2014 - 2020
Zagreb University of Applied Sciences	Long-term Development Strategy of the Zagreb University of Applied Sciences 2014 - 2025
College of Applied Sciences "Lavoslav Ružička" in Vukovar	Development Strategy of the College of Applied Sciences "Lavoslav Ružička" in Vukovar for the Period 2014 - 2020
Marko Marulić Polytechnic in Knin	Development Strategy of the Marko Marulić Polytechnic in Knin for the Period 2019 - 2023
Polytechnic "Nikola Tesla" in Gospić	Work and Development Programme (Strategy) of the Polytechnic "Nikola Tesla" in Gospić for the Period 2017 - 2021
Karlovac University of Applied Sciences	Development Strategy of the Karlovac University of Applied Sciences for the Period 2016 - 2021
Polytechnic in Požega	Development Strategy of the Polytechnic in Požega for the Period 2017 - 2020
Polytechnic of Rijeka	Strategy of the Polytechnic of Rijeka for the Period 2013 - 2020
College of Slavonski Brod	Strategy of the College of Slavonski Brod 2018 - 2022
Polytechnic of Šibenik	Work Programme and Development Strategy of the Polytechnic of Šibenik, 2017 - 2025
University of Applied Health Sciences in Zagreb	University of Applied Health Sciences Development Strategy 2015 - 2020
University of Applied Sciences Velika Gorica	Strategy of The University of Applied Sciences Velika Gorica 2016 - 2020
VERN Polytechnic	Summary of the VERN Development Strategy for the Period 2010 - 2020
Bjelovar University of Applied Sciences	Development Strategy of the Bjelovar University of Applied Sciences for the Period 2018 - 2022

HEI	Name of the document
Istrian University of Applied Sciences (Polytechnic Pula College of Applied Sciences)	Development Strategy of the Polytechnic Pula College of Applied Sciences 2010 - 2020
Zagreb School of Business	Development Strategy 2015 - 2020
Police College in Zagreb	Development Strategy of the Police College in Zagreb 2019 - 2024
College for Management in Tourism and Informatics in Virovitica	Work and Development Programme – Development Strategy of the College for Management in Tourism and Informatics in Virovitica for the 2018 - 2022 Period
Križevci College of Agriculture	Križevci College of Agriculture Development Strategy for the Period 2017 - 2022
Edward Bernays University College	Quality Assurance Strategy
RRiF College of Financial Management	Summary of the Strategic Plan of the RRiF College of Financial Management
"Nikola Šubić Zrinski" University College of Economics, Entrepreneurship and Management	2020 Strategic Plan
College for Information Technologies, Zagreb	Development Strategy of the College for Information Technologies for the Period 2018 - 2023
College of Inspection and Personnel Management	Development Strategy of the College of Inspection and Personnel Management 2013 - 2018
Algebra University College	Development Strategy 2018 - 2022 Algebra University College
College of Occupational Safety and Health	Strategy for the Period 2016 - 2020
Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek	Development Strategy of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek 2013 - 2018
Effectus University College for Law and Finance	Strategic Framework 2016 - 2020 (excerpt from the document)

Objective 1. Systematically collect, process and apply data relevant for enhancing the social dimension of higher education

The first goal is divided into five sub-goals, whose implementation is under the co-responsibility of higher education institutions. However, the objectives in their strategies rarely address the specific issue of collecting data related to the social dimension, and only a few institutions list them in their documents. It should be noted that these objectives in strategic documents are often interrelated (such as data collection and subsequent analysis or individual activities), which is why they have been separated into individual sub-objective for the purposes of this analysis.

1.3. Carry out analyses and research with the aim of defining underrepresented and vulnerable groups and enhancing the understanding of the educational experience of students from vulnerable groups about which there is insufficient data

Only four HEIs outline activities that can be linked to this goal. These are the University of Zagreb, the University of Applied Health Sciences, College of Applied Sciences "Lavoslav Ružička" and Marko Marulić Polytechnic. Furthermore, the University of Zagreb has set as its goal the identification of underrepresented groups and activities that are part of the sub-goal 1.7. In addition, they emphasize the intention to collect data and keep records of the beneficiaries of various forms of support, and introduce systematic monitoring of students of underrepresented groups. The University of Applied Health Sciences has set similar goals connected with the analysis of underrepresented and vulnerable groups, keeping data on students with disabilities by developing a database, and joining the national system for monitoring the enrolment of underrepresented and vulnerable groups. In this regard, the College of Applied Sciences "Lavoslav Ružička" is focused exclusively on students from a lower socioeconomic background, and plans to develop criteria for determining which students belong to this group and establish an electronic database.

As for the Marko Marulić Polytechnic, the need to identify underrepresented and vulnerable groups was mentioned only as an opportunity within the SWOT analysis.

1.4. Conduct research as to why students from vulnerable groups drop out of higher education

Higher education institutions do not list specific research of this type, but the activity listed by the University of Zagreb can be singled out as closest to it. It includes an analysis of student pass and completion rates and the position of underrepresented groups with the aim of improving the model of student participation in study costs. One can also mention the Marko Marulić Polytechnic, which emphasises the increase in the share of graduates from underrepresented and vulnerable groups as an opportunity within its SWOT analysis, but does not mention the implementation of analyses related to this issue.

1.6. Develop a standardised methodology for monitoring the educational and professional paths of students (enrolment, study, graduation, employment) according to their social and economic status

No goals were found in the HEIs strategic documents that correspond to this goal.

1.7. Base activities aimed at enhancing the social dimension on relevant empirical data

Building on the identification and analyses listed under sub-goal 1.3, the University of Zagreb aims to take into account the needs of underrepresented groups and raise the level of access and support for students from these groups. Also, the University of Rijeka has stated that it intends to use the analysis of economic and social barriers to undertake specific activities aimed at improving the social dimension. In addition, they emphasised the need for studies on the secondary school and student population, with the aim of detecting and removing obstacles.

1.8. Evaluate the success of existing activities aimed at enhancing the social dimension of higher education

No goals were found in the HEIs strategic documents that correspond to this goal.

Objective 2. Facilitate access to higher education for underrepresented and vulnerable groups and remove barriers to enrolment

2.2. Increase interest for higher education among underrepresented and vulnerable groups

Some institutions list activities related to the achievement of this sub-goal, but they are mainly aimed at the wider student population, and not specifically at underrepresented and vulnerable groups, e.g. marketing focused on high schools and the organization of career days, job fairs and open days. Only three

HEIs explicitly state the implementation of this type of activities aimed directly at underrepresented and vulnerable groups. The University of Zagreb outlines that some of its constituents will work on activities and programmes in the community in order to inform, motivate and facilitate access of underrepresented groups to higher education, the University of Rijeka cited activities of informing high school students about support programmes for vulnerable groups on their websites, and the Algebra University College wrote that one of the activities of its Economic Council is to encourage the education of students with disabilities, but did not explain it further.

2.3. Improve professional guidance and self-information system

No goals were found in the HEIs strategic documents that correspond to this goal.

Objective 3. Provide equal opportunities for all students during their studies

3.1. Remove barriers during the early stages of studies

The goals of higher education institutions are much more general than the activities within this sub-goal in the National Plan. Namely, the activities of the National Plan include measuring the student workload in all years of study, and equalizing the workload of study programmes. On the other hand, HEIs mostly talk about the need to facilitate access to study for various vulnerable and underrepresented groups on a general level. Thus, the University of Zagreb mentions the design and implementation of activities and programmes aimed at the social inclusion of students from underrepresented and vulnerable groups, the Juraj Dobrila University talks about facilitating access for students of lower socioeconomic status and students with disabilities through the allocation of a proportion of the programme funds, and the University of Rijeka about removing obstacles to successful studying that arise from a variety of reasons including socioeconomic conditions, disability, age, and parenthood. In this regard, the University North is considering introducing study programmes in the technical and biomedical fields to make them available to local students who cannot study at other HEIs due to their socioeconomic status, the College for Management in Tourism and Informatics in Virovitica emphasises easier access for students from a lower socioeconomic background, and the College of Applied Sciences "Lavoslav Ružička", in addition to this student group, also singles out students older than 25.

Somewhat more concrete measures are being considered by the University of Applied Health Sciences, which singles out the development of instructions and guidelines for enrolment in order to adapt it to people with disabilities, and thus remove specific obstacles at the beginning of their studies.

Finally, the Križevci College of Agriculture states the need to conduct propaedeutic courses for first-year students in order to reduce the dropout rate. Although this goal does not apply specifically to vulnerable and underrepresented groups, it can certainly include members of these groups who need introductory content to help them master later material and increase their ability to complete the studies.

3.2. Establish an effective system of non-material student support during their studies

Within this goal of the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension, the focus is exclusively on nonmaterial support, and there is no reference to infrastructural conditions that facilitate studying, neither in this nor in other goals. Part of the material support that relates to scholarships is covered under the sub-goal 5.2. For this reason, the focus here is on forms of intangible support, but with a special mention of HEIs goals and activities that are intended to improve infrastructural conditions (adjustment of facilities), which still represent an important challenge for certain HEIs and another step in providing access to higher education to certain groups of students. Another issue that was singled out is that of sports, which the HEIs cite as important in terms of integrating students with disabilities and enabling their equal participation in student life.

a) Non-material support

Regarding non-material support, there are HEIs that have indicated either the existence of support or the intention to establish support, and did not define specific groups, but generally referred to vulnerable and underrepresented groups. Thus, the Križevci College of Agriculture emphasizes the need to appoint a contact person who would be in charge of providing support for students from vulnerable and underrepresented groups; Edward Bernays University College plans to launch a Student Counselling Centre that would provide various forms of psychological assistance; and the College for Information Technologies states that they are focused on providing support to students from vulnerable and underrepresented groups within the teaching process. Among their planned activities, the Juraj Dobrila University lists further support for the students' psychological centre and increasing activities that would raise students' awareness of psychological counselling; and the Bjelovar University of Applied Sciences intends to develop a model of support for students from vulnerable and underrepresented groups, but does not specify the type of support.

Furthermore, one could single out a group of HEIs that focus on providing specific support for students with disabilities in aspects such as assistance, psychological support, transportation, student standard in general, etc. In this regard, some HEIs have reported the existence of services that deal with this issue, such as the Karlovac University of Applied Sciences, which underlines the activities of the Center for Support of Students with Disabilities and assistants that are provided to students with disabilities; the Catholic University of Croatia has a Centre for Psychological Counselling that provides professional help and support, with special assistance for students with disabilities; and the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University boasts a unique Office for students with disabilities.

Additionally, certain measures and goals have been proposed by the University North, which intends to provide special support to students with disabilities and help them exercise their rights through the Office for Student Support, Career Development (Alumni) and Lifelong Learning; by the University of Applied Health Sciences, whose goals include ensuring an adapted transportation for people with disabilities; and the University of Dubrovnik, which intends to pay special attention to the standard and life of students with disabilities, and plans to provide support with the aim of ensuring equal opportunities for students with disabilities.

The University of Zagreb has elaborated on the existing problems and said that there was no psychological counselling at the university level, but that it was available at some constituents, which could lead to student inequality. In addition, they emphasise the existence of the Office for Students with Disabilities, but also point out its inadequacy for the implementation of activities related to spatial capacities. Therefore, one of their goals is the provision of financial resources for the implementation of support for students with disabilities, and the development of procedures for the implementation of support for these students. In addition, their goals include the establishment of a Student Counselling and Support Centre, which would combine different types of support for students with disabilities and other underrepresented groups and groups in need of additional support, as well as counselling related to personal and academic difficulties and career development. The work of the Center would also include the development of other activities and programmes, as well as the organizational structures for individual areas. Thus, they envisage the establishment of cooperation with associations that provide support to students, and encouraging student projects aimed at developing a system of support for underrepresented groups.

In addition to the above-mentioned HEIs, we can single out the College for Management in Tourism and Informatics in Virovitica, which states that it acknowledges the unequal position of students in exercising their right to use the student restaurant; the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, which emphasizes the spiritual support it provides for students; and the "Nikola Šubić Zrinski" University College of Economics, Entrepreneurship and Management, whose strategic document mentions their assistance to students with special needs, but does not define what exactly this assistance implies.

b) Infrastructure

As part of their SWOT analyses, some HEIs have listed the insufficient adaptation of facilities for people with disabilities as a weakness. These are the University North, the Polytechnic of Šibenik, the Marko Marulić Polytechnic, the College of Applied Sciences "Lavoslav Ružička", and the College of Inspection and Personnel Management.

On the other hand, other HEIs emphasize the appropriateness of their facilities in terms of accessibility to students with disabilities and the available equipment. Thus, Algebra University College emphasizes its superbly equipped facilities that are adapted for people with disabilities, and the Karlovac University of Applied Sciences states that an adaptation has been made that enables equal access to education and infrastructure.

Some HEIs list the improvement and adaptation of facilities among the goals and measures they intend to take. Thus the University of Zagreb mentions its goal of ensuring spatial accessibility for unhindered access, movement, residence and work of persons with disabilities, the University of Zadar plans on adjusting the access to all buildings for students with disabilities in order to ensure maximum accessibility for this group of students, and the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University also wants to adjust the staircase in the Rectorate building so that is becomes accessible to people with disabilities.

Finally, the University of Rijeka, the University of Split, the Polytechnic in Požega, the University of Applied Health Sciences, and the College of Applied Sciences "Lavoslav Ružička" plan to remove physical barriers to enable access and movement for people with disabilities.

c) Sport

The issue of sports activities and persons with disabilities is mentioned by only three HEIs, out of which the University of Zagreb has gone the furthest in the strategic planning of these activities. In its Sports Strategy, the University of Zagreb mentions the availability and adaptation of infrastructure to students with disabilities. They also detect problems related to sports and physical exercise of students with disabilities, including the lack of University regulations in this field, a lack of sensibility and knowledge of the academic community about the needs of people with disabilities, insufficient openness of the academic community, and a lack of sports events for students with disabilities. Consequently, they aim to adopt a general act that would prescribe the organization of physical exercise and sports at the University of Zagreb, the organization of sports meetings for students with disabilities, cooperation of competent bodies and associations on projects for students with disabilities, signing an agreement with the Croatian Paralympic Committee on providing support to students that are categorized as athletes with disabilities, and implementing the recommendation on the conditions for studying of athletes with disabilities on as many constituents as possible.

To a lesser extent, this topic is also mentioned by the University of Zadar, which states that it will work on enabling the participation of persons with disabilities in competitions and sports activities, and the University of Rijeka, which will work on enabling the participation of persons with disabilities in competitions and other sports activities, as well as on adapting its physical education classes to the needs of these students.

3.3. Increase the flexibility of study programmes

This goal of the National Plan is aimed at introducing procedures for the evaluation of informal and nonformal learning and the implementation of distance learning. Additionally, the HEIs strategic documents also show their focus on lifelong learning, which can enable the provision of flexible learning paths for adults. In addition to these opportunities, it is evident that several HEIs have directly connected the flexibilization of study programmes with underrepresented and vulnerable groups. Thus, the University of Applied Health Sciences has set itself the task of adapting study programmes to underrepresented and vulnerable groups, and adapting the teaching process to persons with disabilities,

College of Applied Sciences "Lavoslav Ružička" has prescribed the measure of developing adapted study programmes for students over the age of 25, and the College for Management in Tourism and Informatics in Virovitica intends to work on adjusting the teaching schedule for students in a disadvantaged position.

a) Recognition of prior learning

The recognition of prior learning has been acknowledged primarily in the strategic documents of public universities. The University of Zagreb wants to develop a system for the recognition of prior learning, and intends to establish an Office for the recognition of prior learning along with the necessary regulations. Among its activities, the University of Dubrovnik emphasizes the establishment of a functional system for recognizing learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning. A similar goal is set by the Juraj Dobrila University, which includes the development of a system and methodology for the recognition of prior learning, the adoption of accompanying regulations, and the preparation of reports on the conducted recognition procedures. The University of Rijeka states that one of its challenges is to establish a system and process for the recognition of previously acquired knowledge and skills, and intends to participate in the organization of such a system on the national level; they also briefly mention their intention to work on the education of elderly citizens. The University North plans to establish criteria and adopt regulations that govern the recognition of ECTS credits for noninstitutional, lifelong and non-formal forms of qualifications, and to establish a system of recognition of learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning. In addition to these universities, the "Nikola Šubić Zrinski" University College of Economics, Entrepreneurship and Management also has a goal of establishing a unique system of recognising and evaluating non-formal and informal learning.

b) Distance learning

Distance learning enables the adjustment of the teaching process to people who are not able to attend classes regularly due to their work status, physical distance or other circumstances. Some HEIs directly link these circumstances with the development and introduction of systems for distance learning.

Among other activities related to distance learning, four public universities also mention the adoption of documents that could contribute to the further development of this system. The University North emphasizes the existence of its service for IT support, e-learning and distance learning, and intends to continue with the development and implementation of an e-learning system and an electronic system for the assessment of learning outcomes. Accordingly, they plan to develop infrastructure and procure equipment that will enable them to record and archive distance learning materials, and adopt regulations that would introduce the possibility of distance exams and consultations. The Juraj Dobrila University's list of priority activities includes the activities aimed at encouraging the full implementation of e-learning on all its constituents. To this end, they intend to adopt a regulation that would encourage teachers to use IT technology in teaching. Among its goals, the University of Dubrovnik emphasizes the need for organizing distance- and e-learning, and plans for cooperating with SRCE and CARNET to develop a concept of distance learning, ensure all teachers and students equal access to these resources, and provide continuous training for teachers and students regarding their use. The University of Zagreb connects distance learning opportunities with the adaptation of part-time studies in order to facilitate studying. They also stressed that there are e-learning versions for as many as 8,500 courses, but that only 5% of them apply the e-learning at the highest level. Accordingly, their goals are to establish an appropriate level and quality of e-learning, develop a comprehensive university-wide virtual learning and teaching environment, define university standards and recommendations for e-learning materials, assess the e-courses, introduce open educational content, and develop online studies.

Algebra University College points out that their online studies have been in the process of accreditation for some time, but that they do not know when they will be accredited. In addition, they posit that it has been shown that students make the greatest progress through exercises, which is why they have not suggested performing those exercises online. They also mention the possibility of support

for distance learning as part of the existing studies through the Moodle system, which is based on student collaboration through repositories, document exchange and the like. However, they point out that such classes do not count towards students' attendance, but are intended as support for students who are travelling or are unable to attend for other reasons, and emphasise the technical equipment of classrooms, which provides support for distance learning. In its SWOT analysis, the Križevci College of Agriculture marked insufficiently developed e-modules and e-learning opportunities as its weakness, and announced its plan to work on the introduction of e-modules in the context of adapting teaching to part-time students, which is similar to the plans of the Polytechnic of Međimurje in Čakovec. Furthermore, the Istrian University of Applied Sciences has singled out the existence of a specialist graduate professional study based on distance learning that is intended for students who work and those who live far from the place of study. In addition, they emphasize e-learning as one of their goals, which is why they intend to adjust the facilities and have 15% of each study programme implemented using e-learning tools. Finally, its SWOT analysis has positioned the demand for study programmes offered through distance learning as an opportunity for the "Nikola Šubić Zrinski" University College of Economics, Entrepreneurship and Management, which therefore intends to provide students with flexible access to education. As a reason for such an approach, they state the provision of education to people who have limited educational resources. In order to introduce distance learning, they intend to redesign their syllabuses, develop an online brand and a technology platform, and invest in staff education and support for students and teachers.

Several HEIs are considering the introduction of distance learning, and are planning to use a certain percentage of such an approach in study programmes or courses. The Polytechnic of Rijeka has set itself the task of using e-learning tools in 75% of all study programmes, and adopting a strategy for the introduction of e-learning. The University of Rijeka highlights the increase in the share of e-learning in study programmes and wants all study programmes to have a 50% usage of e-learning tools; the University of Split aims to design and implement distance learning and increase the teaching content that students can follow through e-learning so that at least 25% of each course is covered by such content; and the Police College states that their goal is to increase the share of e-learning in study programmes so that 20% of each programme uses e-learning tools.

Some HEIs refer to the introduction of distance learning in more general ways. Thus, the Polytechnic in Požega recognizes the development of e-learning as one of the opportunities within its SWOT analysis, and lists the activity of educating its teaching staff in e-learning in order to enable them to make greater use of the necessary technology for this purpose. In addition, they emphasise an increased number of courses and teachers who use e-learning techniques. The University of Applied Health Sciences sees the development of an e-learning system as an opportunity within its SWOT analysis, and sets itself the task of introducing e-learning tools in new courses; the Karlovac University of Applied Sciences plans to increase the share of e-learning in its study programmes; and the Polytechnic of Slavonski Brod intends to introduce e-learning for individual courses at a rate of at least one course per year.

Other HEIs generally talk about improving the distance learning system and introducing new tools. Josip Juraj Strossmayer University has stated that it would improve the existing e-learning system in the period covered by the strategy, but also work on introducing new tools that would enable distance learning. The Marko Marulić Polytechnic cites the continued development of the e-learning process as one of the guidelines for drafting its strategic document, and emphasizes the activity of encouraging students and teaching staff towards a more intensive use of the teaching support system, which also includes e-content. The College of Information Technologies in Zagreb talks about introducing an e-learning system and upgrading the SCAD information system with elements of support for e-learning, but does not elaborate on these goals further. The College of Inspection and Personnel Management emphasizes the development of distance learning systems among its activities, and the College of Occupational Safety and Health sets itself the task of introducing an e-learning system and supporting distance learning.

Additionally, some other HEIs (College for Management in Tourism and Informatics in Virovitica, Polytechnic of Šibenik, VERN', Zagreb School of Business, University of Zadar, Bjelovar University of Applied Sciences, University of Applied Sciences Velika Gorica) also refer to various aspects of introducing distance learning in their strategic documents.

c) Lifelong learning

Almost all the HEIs mention the introduction and development of lifelong learning programmes in their strategic documents. When explaining the goals and measures related to the introduction of lifelong learning programmes, they cite the alignment with the needs of the market and/or the economy (University of Zagreb, Polytechnic in Požega, Marko Marulić Polytechnic, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University, Križevci College of Agriculture, Juraj Dobrila University, Polytechnic of Međimurje in Čakovec, Polytechnic of Slavonski Brod, University of Applied Sciences Velika Gorica, "Nikola Šubić Zrinski" University College of Economics, Entrepreneurship and Management, College of Applied Sciences "Lavoslav Ružička", College of Information Technologies in Zagreb, Polytechnic of Šibenik), and some HEIs point to their focus on the needs of the community or the general public (University of Zagreb, College of Applied Sciences "Lavoslav Ružička", "Nikola Šubić Zrinski" University College of Economics, Entrepreneurship and Management, University of Applied Sciences Velika Gorica, Polytechnic of Međimurje in Čakovec, University of Split, Juraj Dobrila University, Polytechnic of Šibenik).

Among the HEI goals, those of the University North can be singled out for putting the emphasis on a specific approach to the unemployed. Thus they talk about the implementation of lifelong learning in accordance with the needs of economic entities, but also about providing lifelong education to individuals in the place of residence and the immediate surroundings, and offering lifelong learning programmes free of charge for the unemployed in order to enable their greater employability. In addition, their tasks include the development and adoption of the Strategy for Lifelong Learning, new lifelong learning programmes, a plan for the promotion of these programmes, and a systematic increase of their number.

3.4. Improve learning resources

Improving learning resources within the National Plan refers to two activities – the provision of learning resources and adaptation of teaching materials, and the establishment of a mentoring system.

a) Providing learning resources and adapting teaching material

Some institutions have generally reported an increase in the quality and quantity of available materials, textbooks, learning resources and the like, but only in some cases are these goals associated with vulnerable and underrepresented groups. The University of Zagreb was the most comprehensive in considering the issue of providing learning resources and adapting teaching materials. They highlight the provision of accessible and assistive technology at their constituents that is aimed at equalizing access for students with disabilities, and providing access to literature in a digitized form in order to facilitate access for blind and partially sighted students and students with specific learning difficulties. They also want to provide audio recordings of lectures so as to make such materials available to these specific groups of students. The University of Zadar is on a similar track, aiming to provide students with disabilities with assistive technology, which includes the digitization of teaching literature and the development of information systems for the storage of these materials. The College for Management in Tourism and Informatics in Virovitica cites the goal of providing free textbooks and teaching materials to disadvantaged students, including those from lower socioeconomic background, while the Algebra University College says that the assessments of knowledge will be adapted to students with disabilities.

b) Establishing a system of mentoring

The establishment or improvement of a mentoring system is mainly mentioned in the context of providing mentoring support to the entire student population, and the specificity of working with students from

underrepresented and vulnerable groups is not emphasized. Depending on the HEI, these goals include the organization or improvement of the mentoring system, the adoption of mentoring regulations, the introduction of student-mentors in certain courses, the inclusion of alumni in mentoring, etc.

However, some HEIs also provide specific mentoring support for vulnerable groups, mainly for students with disabilities, but there are cases of focusing on other groups as well. Thus, the University of Zagreb, the University of Zadar and the University of Applied Health Sciences cite the implementation of educational assistance for students with disabilities. The Juraj Dobrila University provides tutoring for students from vulnerable groups, including students from lower socioeconomic background and students with disabilities, and the Karlovac University of Applied Sciences emphasises that all students with disabilities have the right to an assistant who helps them during their studies. Finally, the goal of the College of Applied Sciences "Lavoslav Ružička" is to create an adapted system of mentoring and study assistance for students over 25.

3.5. Provide lecturers and administrative staff with professional training for working with vulnerable groups

Regarding the implementation of staff training for working with vulnerable groups, several HEIs stand out - the University of Zagreb, the University of Zadar, the University of Applied Health Sciences and the College of Applied Sciences "Lavoslav Ružička". The Universities of Zagreb and Zadar and the University of Applied Health Sciences have reported a systematic education of academic staff, but only in terms of ensuring the accessibility of higher education to persons with disabilities. At the same time, the University of Zagreb explains this goal in more detail and states the need for a semester-based education for teaching, professional and administrative staff and the need to educate additional educators who will teach these contents. In addition to the goal of providing education on the methods and specifics of working with people with disabilities, the College of Applied Sciences "Lavoslav Ružička" recognised the need to educate staff on the basics of working with deaf and hard-of-hearing people.

3.6. Adjust and improve the part-time study system

In their strategic documents, a number of HEIs consider the adaptation of teaching for part-time students. Among the universities, the HEIs in question are the University of Zagreb, the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, the University of Rijeka and the University North; among the polytechnics are the Bjelovar University of Applied Sciences, the Istrian University of Applied Sciences, the Polytechnic of Rijeka, the University of Applied Health Sciences, the Polytechnic of Međimurje in Čakovec, and the University of Applied Sciences Velika Gorica; and among the colleges are the Križevci College of Agriculture and the "Nikola Šubić Zrinski" University College of Economics, Entrepreneurship and Management.

The strategic documents of the University of Rijeka and the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University, of most polytechnics and the "Nikola Šubić Zrinski" University College of Economics, Entrepreneurship and Management cover the adaptation of the system to part-time students on a quite general level, and simply state that it is necessary. The University of Zagreb aims to develop new and adapt existing part-time studies within the framework of lifelong learning in accordance with the needs of society and the personal development of students. In this regard, they link distance learning with part-time studies so as to make it easier for those students to keep up with the classes. The Križevci College of Agriculture has used its SWOT analysis to detect the insufficient adaptation of teaching to part-time students as one of the institutional weaknesses, which is why they have proclaimed one of their goals to be the adjustment of teaching methods and organization with the aim of improving this area. In doing so, they take into account the need to introduce e-modules, adjust teaching schedules and harmonize the exam terms and methods of assessing learning outcomes for part-time students, and point out that they have always paid great attention to part-time students. The University North discusses this goal and the necessary activities in more detail, and discusses the need to adjust the teaching process, use distance learning opportunities, prescribe lower compulsory attendance, separate classes for full-time and part-

time students, develop special curricula and align learning outcomes. In addition, they are considering the introduction of mandatory distance consultations and additional consultation hours adapted to part-time students.

Objective 4. Increase the completion rate for underrepresented and vulnerable groups and their employment rate after graduation

4.1. Ensuring internship for students from specific underrepresented/vulnerable groups through the cooperation of employers and HEIs

When HEIs refer to the cooperation with employers with the aim of ensuring student internship in their strategic documents, these goals are generally defined and apply to the entire student population, i.e. they are not aimed at providing internships for particular underrepresented and vulnerable groups.

4.2. Organise activities of student support centres (academic and psychological counselling, career development counselling, student internship) that help students achieve the competences required to complete their studies and support their early career development

A specific plan for the support related to the career development of a specific group is provided by the Algebra University College, whose strategic document highlights the goal of providing professional career support for students with disabilities, for which purpose they intend to provide the support of a psychologist and a special educator.

Other HEIs have a visible focus on the goals of trying to establish career development centres and connect students with potential employers, or have already established such centres and are working on further improving their work and introducing new activities.

Thus, the University of Zadar aims to establish a career centre that would improve the provision of relevant information, student guidance and counselling, organizing workshops for the development of entrepreneurial competencies, and establish cooperation with potential employers. The same goal is shared by the Juraj Dobrila University, whose planned activities include the establishment of a Career Center that would provide professional counselling to students. The situation is similar with several polytechnics - the Polytechnic of Šibenik aims to establish a Career Development Center, the Polytechnic in Požega also wants to establish a Career Center that would guide students on the labour market and organize a labour market that would advertise available jobs; and the University of Applied Health Sciences talks about establishing the infrastructure and organizing the Center for Student Support and Career Development. The College for Management in Tourism and Informatics in Virovitica cites the goal of organizing a career centre that would provide support to students in their continued education and careers, as well as provide information to future students, and the Zagreb University of Applied Sciences emphasizes the introduction of a student support system for career guidance and development, but does not specify whether it plans to do this through a special office.

On the other hand, some HEIs have as their strategic goals either the introduction of new activities or the improvement of existing ones. Thus, the University of Zagreb lists among its strategic goals the provision of information, counselling, guidance and education to students in the field of career development and management in terms of job search skills, presentation to employers, and career planning and guidance. In addition, they cite an activity aimed at connecting with the business sector and alumni in order to provide their students with career information and guidance. Among its goals, the University of Zagreb includes the establishment of a Center for Student Counselling and Support, which would combine different types of support and include topics such as academic skills development and career development and management.

Furthermore, the University of Dubrovnik emphasizes support for the activities of the Office for Professional Orientation, and counselling for students and alumni, while the University North points to the existence of the Office for Student Support, Career Development (Alumni) and Lifelong Learning, but also the need to strengthen its human potential. They also state that the Office provides professional support to students, organises educational workshops and provides information on professional development during the studies as well as opportunities for further studies and employment. The University of Applied Sciences Velika Gorica highlights the existence of the centre SOVA (counselling for students), lists as its goals the need to improve the work of the centre through seminars, workshops and student counselling, and plans to develop a system of IT assistance for students.

Certain HEIs cite these goals, but do not define whether they would be implemented within a specific centre. Thus, the Križevci College of Agriculture aims to organize workshops that train students to look for work and increase their employability, which includes writing resumes and cover letters, and preparing for job interviews and tests. Similarly, the Bjelovar University of Applied Sciences states its intention to establish different models of counselling related to career development and professional guidance, and the College for Information Technologies mentions the implementation of plans to improve the quality of teaching and student support that are, among other things, oriented towards improving the professional support for students in shaping their careers.

Several HEIs simply state in their strategic documents that they already perform such activities. The Josip Juraj Strossmayer University emphasizes the existence of the Career Advising Services within the Quality Assurance Center, RRiF highlights its Counselling and Career Development Center, and Edward Bernays University College emphasizes the activities of the Center for Career Development and Market Cooperation, which connects students with the labour market and monitors the satisfaction of employers and students.

4.3. Evaluate HEIs with regard to their support for graduates' early career development based on a unique model of maturity (i.e. determine the level of the HEI in terms of the support it gives students in early career development) and whether the HEI meets the requirements of the Croatian Qualifications Framework (CROQF)

No goals were found in the HEIs strategic documents that correspond to this goal.

4.6. Monitor employment of graduates in the first four months after graduation, and undertake regular reporting

Activities within this goal are focused on monitoring the employment rates of graduates from underrepresented and vulnerable groups. As part of their goals, HEIs list the monitoring of employment, but do not specify whether they are referring to individuals from underrepresented and vulnerable groups. However, even this type of monitoring is mentioned by only a small number of HEIs. The Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek has set the goal of such monitoring in cooperation with the Croatian Employment Service and with input from student services. A similar goal has been set by the University of Zadar, Juraj Dobrila University of Pula, University of Rijeka, Polytechnic of Međimurje in Čakovec, "Nikola Šubić Zrinski" University College of Economics, Entrepreneurship and Management and the Police College.

Objective 5. Improve the student financial support system for members of underrepresented and vulnerable groups

5.1. Consolidate and centralise the collection of data on student financial support at a national, local and institutional level

No goals were found in the HEIs strategic documents that correspond to this goal.

5.2. Award scholarships to first-year applicants from underrepresented and vulnerable groups to continue their education at the level of higher education, and provide assistance to secondary schools whose students achieve poorer outcomes

Some HEIs consider the issue of scholarships or other forms of financial assistance in their strategic documents, but none of them has a strictly defined scholarship for enrolment in the first year of study. Among the HEIs that define specific underrepresented and vulnerable groups in terms of providing scholarships, there is a dominant focus on students from lower socioeconomic background, and the only other group that is mentioned are students with disabilities.

The University of Zagreb has said that it will award 100 scholarships on an annual basis to students from lower socioeconomic background and students with disabilities. As part of the goal of reorganizing and improving the scholarship system, they highlight the need for developing additional criteria for awarding scholarships to students from underrepresented groups, and establishing additional sources of funding for those groups of students. The University of Rijeka cites the rather general activity of developing financial support mechanisms for students with the aim of establishing a scholarship system, but in the text of the Strategy they further explain that this system should be aimed at students from lower socioeconomic background. In addition, they are considering increasing the number of applications within the programme of the Aleksandar Abramov Fund in order to reflect the real needs of low-income students. Furthermore, the Juraj Dobrila University notes that their goal is to increase the number of students from a lower socioeconomic background and students with disabilities who receive scholarships, but they do not state whether they intend to award such scholarships themselves.

Establishing a model of assistance to students of lower socioeconomic status is one of the goals listed in the strategic document of the Polytechnic of Međimurje in Čakovec, while the Marko Marulić Polytechnic and the Polytechnic of Slavonski Brod cite scholarships for students of lower socioeconomic status as one of the activities. A similar goal related to students of lower socioeconomic status has been set by the University of Applied Health Sciences, which has already determined that one of its SWOT analysis strengths is that they have regulated the procedure of scholarships for the needy. The Karlovac University of Applied Sciences refers to the establishment of a support system for students of lower socioeconomic status under performance agreements through which scholarships were awarded, and the University North intends to include businesses in providing scholarships to students from lower socioeconomic background through the development of the Student Foundation. The Algebra University College cites the funding of scholarships as one of the focuses of its Economic Council, and offers the possibility of financial support for lower-income students. The College for Management in Tourism and Informatics in Virovitica also emphasises the intended recipients of its support, but the target group is set somewhat wider and defined as disadvantaged students.

Finally, the Rochester Institute of Technology does not explicitly list underrepresented and vulnerable groups, but their goals emphasize the need to provide financial support to academically accomplished students to that they can be successful regardless of their ability to pay for their studies.

In addition to more specific goals related to scholarships, one can mention VERN', which in its strategic document states that they are committed to actively promoting higher education through private and state scholarships that take into account the students' socioeconomic status, i.e. aim to remove social barriers. However, they have not defined this as their goal to which specific activities would be linked, but as a value they stand for.

5.3. Financial support from public sources should be primarily based on direct support in the form of scholarships, should be primarily awarded according to needs-based criteria, and the monthly scholarship amount should be adjusted to the actual costs of studying

One of the activities within this sub-goal in the National Plan is to increase support that will enable students to spend a certain period of study abroad. Corresponding goals are included in the strategic

documents of three HEIs. The Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek states the intention to increase the amount of financial support from its own funds for students who go on mobility schemes, and improved financial conditions for mobility is also the aim of the University of Zadar. Finally, the University of Zagreb does not explicitly mention financial assistance, but emphasizes the need to increase the mobility of students with disabilities, lower-income students and students from other underrepresented groups.

5.4. Increase the availability of student dormitory accommodation under favourable financial conditions, with the aim of providing such accommodation for more than 20% of students

The issue of accommodation availability is considered in the strategic documents of 19 higher education institutions. Also, all eight public universities in Croatia deal with this issue in some way.

The University of Zagreb discusses the issues of accommodation in two of its strategic documents (Spatial and Functional Development Strategy and Student Support Development Strategy). They emphasize the inadequacy of existing accommodation in terms of capacity and quality, and the importance of thorough renovation. The goal is to increase accommodation capacity so that all students from other counties, who cannot afford other types of accommodation, have the opportunity to get a place in a dormitory. As a more long-term goal, the University of Zagreb cites the expansion of capacities that is necessary in order to also secure a place in the dormitories for domicile students. In addition, the University of Zagreb mentions as one of the activities the analysis of accommodation needs of students with disabilities in order to provide the necessary accommodation for this group of students and adapt the space to their needs. Similar goals are set by the University of Zadar, which is considering improving its accommodation capacities, with a special focus on the accommodation of disadvantaged students and an increased capacity for students coming from other counties, so that all students who need it could get adequate dorm accommodation. They have also set a long-term goal of providing domicile students with accommodation in the dormitory. Additionally, the University of Zadar plans to align the increase of accommodation capacities with the enrolment policy, analyse the situation and students' needs for accommodation capacities, establish a system to help students find private accommodation, and develop a new model of accommodation subsidies. The University of Rijeka also emphasizes the need to build a student dormitory in order to provide accommodation for students from other places, and provide assistance in finding private accommodation.

The University of Dubrovnik emphasizes the construction of a student dormitory as a goal, and focuses on the issue of students' private accommodation, which is problematic due to tourism. The Juraj Dobrila University only briefly mentions that it is working on increasing the number of accommodation units as part of infrastructure development that is taking place in accordance with the University's development priorities, the University North singles out the construction of a dormitory in Koprivnica, and the University of Split the renovation of old student dormitories, along with increased capacities and improved standards. The Josip Juraj Strossmayer University focuses on the long-standing problems with student accommodation, and the need to build new accommodation capacities and implement continuous measures in order to improve the student standard in connection with this issue. In addition to the public universities, the Catholic University of Croatia states the need for the development of student accommodation on campus as a specific spatial development goal.

The need for accommodation facilities is also emphasized by some polytechnics. The Polytechnic of Šibenik has set the construction of a student dormitory as its goal, the Istrian University of Applied Sciences mentions the need for a student dormitory, the Polytechnic of Međimurje in Čakovec aims to adapt former barracks into student accommodation, and the College of Applied Sciences "Lavoslav Ružička" emphasizes the development of institutional support for students related to their accommodation. The Bjelovar University of Applied Sciences mentions the problem of providing adequate student accommodation as its SWOT analysis weakness, and sets the goal of finding a solution to the problem of subsidized student accommodation. Finally, the Polytechnic in Požega emphasizes the goal of building

a student dormitory with the funds intended for the modernization, improvement and expansion of accommodation infrastructure for disadvantaged students.

Certain HEIs indicate that they have realized projects related to student accommodation. Thus, the Križevci College of Agriculture mentions a house which they provided to accommodate five students of lower socioeconomic status, the Karlovac University of Applied Sciences singles out the existence of a newly renovated student dormitory building as its strength in the SWOT analysis, the College for Management in Tourism and Informatics in Virovitica mentions the constructed student dormitory and sets itself a goal of taking into consideration the unfavourable position of students when determining the criteria for accommodation in a student dormitory.

5.7. Introduce trainings on financial planning for successful studies

No goals were found in the HEIs strategic documents that correspond to this goal.

Objective 6. Include standards related to enhancing the social dimension of higher education into the quality assurance system

6.1. Improve the process of management and institutional policy-making related to increasing the availability of higher education

Only the Križevci College of Agriculture explicitly states among its goals that it is necessary to prepare a document about students from vulnerable and underrepresented groups. It is possible that other HEIs have already produced such documents, or that such policies have been incorporated into the more general development strategies, which is also evident from the objectives covered by this analysis.

6.2. Improve the internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions by promoting and assessing their activities focused on facilitating the studies of vulnerable and underrepresented groups

No goals were found in the HEIs strategic documents that correspond to this goal.

Conclusion

For seven of the 24 sub-goals defined within the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia 2019-2021, no corresponding goals were found in the strategic documents of higher education institutions. Some of these sub-goals require a coordinated cooperation at the national level (e.g. the development of a standardized methodology for monitoring students' educational and professional pathways based on their social and economic status; introducing HEI assessments on the issue of support for graduates' early career development based on a single model of maturity), and additional project funding (e.g. analysing the collected data on financial assistance to underrepresented and vulnerable students under sub-goal 5.1; introducing financial planning education for successful students). Therefore, the impetus to address these goals should come from the national level, and in cooperation between HEIs and the national bodies responsible for higher education. In terms of the addressed sub-goals, it is evident that, in defining their strategic goals, HEIs predominantly refer to two vulnerable or underrepresented groups; these are students with disabilities and students of lower socioeconomic status. These groups benefit from having the most insights collected through the conducted research, as well as the proposed measures for improving the position of these students, which greatly facilitates HEIs' planning of goals and selecting specific measures and activities. Part-time students are mentioned less frequently, and mainly in connection to the adjustment of studies to this group, and some HEIs sporadically touch upon students who live outside the place of residence and mature students. Other underrepresented and vulnerable groups that are included in the National Plan -

such as alternative care students, students with children, female students in the technical field and male students in the humanities - are not explicitly mentioned in the strategic documents, and there are no precise measures to improve their position for the purpose of facilitating access to higher education, providing support during studies, or increasing their completion rates. Finally, some strategic objectives do not address specific underrepresented and vulnerable groups, but relate to the student population as a whole (e.g. activities related to increasing interest in access to higher education, providing student internship, or monitoring their employment). Setting such goals is valuable for understanding the overall student population, but does not contribute to understanding the needs of vulnerable and underrepresented groups, and does not offer calibrated measures to improve their access to higher education and provide equal opportunities during their studies.

In this respect, the existence of goals and solutions for the entire student population, or ones that are adapted to individual groups - mainly students with disabilities and students of lower socioeconomic status - open the possibility of their adaptation and application for improving the status of other underrepresented and vulnerable groups. Thus, for example, systems of mentoring and other forms of intangible support are mentioned either in relation to the entire student population, or in the context of students with disabilities. However, adapting these systems to address the specific needs of particular underrepresented and vulnerable groups would bring added value in empowering these groups of students and contributing to their successful study. The same is true for the organization of student internships in cooperation with employers. Namely, the needs and possibilities of members of underrepresented and vulnerable groups differ from students from the general population, which makes it necessary for HEIs to cooperate with employers on determining internship requirements that are adapted to individual groups. For this reason, it is important that measures that already exist, and are aimed at the general student population or individual underrepresented and vulnerable groups, are further developed and adapted to other identified vulnerable and underrepresented groups in accordance with their needs.

The large disparity between the limited number of identified and addressed underrepresented and vulnerable groups and those that are not mentioned at all indicates that the Croatian HEIs have a limited understanding of the social dimension in higher education. The issue of recognizing these groups and addressing the challenges they face is important for removing the biases of the higher education system and achieving a higher degree of fairness. Potentially, some of these goals and measures at the HEI level stem from national policies that are mainly aimed at improving the social dimension of students with disabilities and students of lower socioeconomic status. Likewise, those groups of students that are sporadically mentioned at the level of national policies, such as part-time students and mature students, only occasionally appear in the goals of higher education institutions.

5.

ANALYSIS OF THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF SELECTED UNDERREPRESENTED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS WITH A FOCUS ON RECOGNISING OBSTACLES TO STUDYING

5.1. Research methodology

5.1.1. Study limitations

5.2. Results

5.2.1. Students from the Roma minority

5.2.2. Students with asylum/refugee status

5.2.3. LGBTQ+ students

5.2.4. Students from alternative care systems

5.2.5. Female students in the technical field

5.2.6. Male students in the humanities

5.2.7. Students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans

5. ANALYSIS OF THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF SELECTED UNDERREPRESENTED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS WITH A FOCUS ON RECOGNISING OBSTACLES TO STUDYING

As it was outlined in the introduction, the theoretical definition of vulnerability corresponds to the assumption that students from vulnerable and underrepresented groups encounter specific barriers related to their social positions and identities. The focus of this analysis is therefore on gaining a deeper insight into the student experience in order to identify the relevant obstacles arising from belonging to a vulnerable group. The analysis focuses on underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students in Croatia that have not been previously covered by systematic data collection.

5.1. Research methodology

In the period from December 2019 to March 2020, a total of 18 focus groups and interviews were conducted with a total of 58 students from underrepresented and vulnerable groups. The research included students of different studies and different years of study at higher education institutions in Zagreb, Rijeka, Osijek, Split and Varaždin. Some students were contacted directly through higher education institutions, and others through the Ministry of Science and Education and civil associations active in this field.

More complete data on the conducted focus groups and interviews are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Information on the conducted focus groups and interviews

Underrepresented or vulnerable group	Method of data collection, number of participants, and the location of the HEI/ the interview or focus group
Students from alternative care systems	1 interview: 1 participant, Zagreb 1 interview: 1 participant, Rijeka 1 interview: 1 participant, Varaždin 1 focus group: 3 participants, Osijek
Male students in the humanities	1 focus group: 4 participants, Zagreb 1 focus group: 3 participants, Rijeka 1 focus group: 3 participants, Zagreb
Female students in the technical field	1 interview: 2 participants, Zagreb 1 focus group: 4 participants, Zagreb 1 focus group: 5 participants, Rijeka
Students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans	1 focus group: 5 participants, Osijek 1 focus group: 7 participants, Split 1 interview: 2 participants, Zagreb
LGBTQ+ students	1 focus group: 7 participants, Rijeka 1 focus group: 4 participants, Zagreb
Students from the Roma minority	1 interview: 2 participants, Zagreb
Students with asylum/refugee status	1 focus group: 3 participants, Zagreb 1 interview: 1 participant, Zagreb

The focus groups on average lasted around 90 minutes, and the interviews around 50 minutes, and the participants were students from only one underrepresented or vulnerable group. In this way, it was possible to focus the conversations on specific topics characteristic for each group. Focus group discussions and interviews were conducted according to interview guidelines (Appendix 1), which contained questions related to the following topics: selection of a study programme (correlation with belonging to an underrepresented or vulnerable group); study success (personal and institutional prerequisites and obstacles to study success); performance and study satisfaction (expectations of a successful completion of studies and related factors); and life during studying (accommodation, scholarships, support from family or loved ones). The guidelines were developed on the basis of the defined research problems, and some of the questions from the protocol were adapted from Doolan et al. (2015). During the focus group with students who were granted international protection - asylum, the interview was conducted in both English and Croatian, and an English translation of the guidelines was used (Appendix 2).

Discussions in all focus groups and interviews were recorded, except in one case when a participant refused to be recorded, so notes were kept during the interview. Audio recordings of focus groups and interviews were transcribed. The recording transcript of the focus group with students who were granted international protection (asylum) originally followed the languages that were used - with English being the predominant one - and was then translated into Croatian (parts of the interview with a student who spoke Croatian remained in the original). All focus groups and interviews were conducted by members of the research team. All interviewees were provided with all relevant information related to the project, and agreed to participate in focus groups and interviews. All research participants were guaranteed complete anonymity.

In this research, qualitative thematic analysis was used (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Based on the protocols and transcripts, an initial coding scheme was developed, and later supplemented during the process of coding and analysis. The coding scheme contains 37 first-level codes, all of which include second- and sometimes third-level codes. The process of coding and analysing the coded transcripts was carried out in the software package for qualitative data analysis QSR NVivo 12. The coding involved six researchers who were assigned collected transcripts of one or two groups of vulnerable students. Transcripts were processed by using qualitative analysis procedures that included open coding according to the coding scheme, the extraction of specific and super-ordinate codes (sorting) and comparison, with everything guided by the structural units of the protocol in order to describe the specific experiences of students from each vulnerable group. The descriptive results of the analysis were also supported by statements of participants who were given pseudonyms in order to preserve their anonymity.

5.1.1. Study limitations

When it comes to the limitations of the conducted research, it should be noted that most focus groups and interviews were held in Zagreb and Rijeka, and therefore the research findings mostly represent the experiences of students in these two cities - only some students from alternative care systems, some students who are children of Croatian war veterans and one female student belonging to the Roma minority (interviewed in Zagreb) did not study in Zagreb or Rijeka. This uneven regional distribution may affect the findings, as the experiences of students studying in other cities in Croatia may differ from those of students in these two university centres: for example, stigmatization and discrimination of LGBTQ+ students may be more pronounced in smaller and less liberal environments, just like the pressures on prospective students regarding the selection of gender non-stereotypical HEIs and studies; on the other hand, there may be differences in terms of the possibility of exercising material rights such as the right to accommodation in a dormitory. It should also be noted that only two female students belonging to the Roma minority participated in the survey, which is significantly smaller sample compared to other groups

of students. The latter limitation has both a regional and a gender aspect, since only the study experiences of female students belonging to the Roma minority in Zagreb and Osijek are represented. Regional and gender imbalances are also present among students with asylum/refugee status, who were represented only by male students who study in Zagreb. Although it is not known how many students of this target group are actually included in the higher education system and in which cities, it can be assumed that students who are under international protection also study in other cities. Whether there are women among them is an open question for which there are no official data yet. An additional limitation is the fact that the study represented participants in only some technical or humanities studies in which women or men are underrepresented. Since both technical studies and the humanities differ from each other in terms of gender structure (Jokić and Ristić Dedić, 2014), the research findings do not fully reflect the experiences of female students in technical studies or male students in the humanities. It should also be noted that students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans were invited to participate on the basis of belonging to a wider category of students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans, and not to one of its specific subgroups (e.g. students who are children of military veterans with 100% disability or children of killed and missing veterans), which may differ in terms of vulnerability.

Given these study limitations, there is a possibility that the presented data somewhat underestimates the problems faced by some of the students belonging to the studied underrepresented and vulnerable groups.

5.2. Results

5.2.1. Students from the Roma minority[2]

On study selection

Female students included in this research study in Zagreb and Osijek at a faculty and a polytechnic from the fields of biomedical and social sciences. The main reasons for choosing these HEIs and studies were their own interests, the possibility of employment after graduation, and the logical continuation of their secondary education:

> **Snježana:** *…I could've gotten a job, but ever since I was little, I always asked myself: "Who are you, meaning the majority population, and what, and who am I, am I capable of enrolling into a university?"*
>
> **Veronika:** *So, when I decided to enrol to XXXX, the first thing I wanted to know was if I could find work with this study programme.*
>
> **Snježana:** *First of all I decided to continue my education, I mean I finished secondary nursing school…*

The students also find motivation for continuing their education at the level of higher education in their belonging to a national minority which, in a way, presented a challenge and an act of defiance toward the majority population in order to show that they (the Roma) can do it:

> **Veronika:** *So, I really think that we, us Roma, that we who are more educated will show, I mean illustrate this difference that the majority population projects onto us, that we're not, how should I say this, that we're not made for anything more. But actually we are made for more than they think, it's only that our people are a little withdrawn because, because they need a little more, wind in our sails, I mean a little*

[2] In addition to the possibility of applying for a government Roma scholarship, a special MSE decision states that students are entitled to dorm accommodation – meaning that they have to contact the MSE to issue a special decision. According to MSE information for the academic year 2019/2020, a total of 31 students from this vulnerable group received the state scholarship. If they meet the requirements, students from the Roma minority have the right of direct enrolment into one HEI in Croatia.

more motivation to achieve something more, from their capacity because they are not really aware how much potential they've got because, because they live in this narrow minded society, which actually demotivates them in a way.

In addition, the selection and possibility of accessing higher education are also affected by the influence and efforts of the governing structures of the Roma national minority, the possibility of direct enrolment in higher education for members of the Roma minority, and the awareness that their ethnicity gives them an advantage in employment:

Veronika: *And then I saw that I had, that with the XXXX I can work in all public services and then of course during the study I saw the opportunities and disadvantages and primarily, so first when I studied constitutional law and the national minorities, I saw that I had an advantage in getting employment in the public administration and what I also want to say is that in this public sector, let's say some social department, I want to work on the issues of the Roma minority.*

Snježana: *…my parents supported me in this and told me I had, thanks to the member of the Parliament I had, I had direct enrolment to the university which made it much easier for me.*

Study success – prerequisites and obstacles to study success

Personal prerequisites and obstacles to studying

There are only two individual prerequisites that the Roma students mention as important for successful studying. The first refers to believing in yourself, i.e. self-confidence, and the second to the support of close/important people:

Snježana: *Support also has to come from ourselves and some self-respect because if we don't have self-respect we won't achieve anything. We'll achieve it, but it'll be very hard.*

Snježana: *I primarily think that parents play a big role here. Parents are the ones who send a child, in fact the child enrols in high school at 15, 16 years old and none of us knew what to enrol and of course we'd consult with all institutions, with everyone to know what we are dealing with. And they're actually the ones and thanks to them, I'm very lucky to have such parents who said, "Look, I didn't, I didn't finish high school, I didn't go to college, but that's why I'm going to give my child, that's why I'm going to give you something I've never had in my life and could never have." I also have a twin sister who went to medical school with me, and I'm very grateful.*

On the other hand, the interviewed students have also talked about the many obstacles and aggravating factors to successful study, especially those related to the fact that they are members of the Roma national minority. These obstacles are primarily related to the society's generally bad and marginalizing attitude towards the Roma, and to the stigmatization, i.e. discrimination. The students feel that they are most resented for their special rights, but that there is also stigmatization within their own ethnic group. They emphasize that these discriminatory attitudes cause them great fear:

Veronika: *In fact, I think that the key thing is that Croatian society doesn't want to accept us and that it's actually very, very difficult to get involved and break into their society. Because I think, I had this situation in high school, and I can say that now during university the situation is completely different because they have accepted me more than before.*

Snježana: *As for these rights. A lot of them complain that we have a lot of rights, in fact, that we take advantage of a lot of things. I'm very sorry, I feel bad, because it was us that got those rights and we're the minority, if I'm not mistaken, which is the largest in Croatia. They object that, so I had a case that we're a nation that doesn't want to socialise with you. It's all in the character and in… No, in how we treat other people. Because this, that's why these rights exist, and they decided that we know how to use them.*

Veronika: *Also for example, I don't know if you've faced this problem, that our Roma people, think that those of us who're in college, they think we're living a fantasy life. It's like they separated themselves from the Roma community, she is now living a different life, that's not true.*

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

Furthermore, adaptation to a new environment and a lack of a tradition of inclusion in education among Roma families are the next aggravating circumstances that result in a low awareness of study opportunities and obligations, among other things. Female students stress that their parents are very uninformed, and that sometimes they even obstruct their inclusion in higher education – generally because of a bad financial situation:

Veronika: *…us Roma, that is, our Roma people have a little problem with that, when they want that step, that is when they want to take a step forward there's the family that will, that'll present an obstacle, because our parents, most of our parents, not all, don't have that significance of education. They don't know what education can mean for us because they haven't experienced education for themselves and what it can, that is what are the disadvantages of education, the disadvantages and advantages of education, and I think we should work harder on the literacy of the Roma family and their awareness that their children need to be educated.*

Veronika: *And also, as far as information, we're not as informed as them. Because, for example, we don't know that one student who I'll go and ask what mid-terms mean, while for example, their parents already, in the first phase, they already know what it is to be a student and what it is to study while I have no one. I don't know the difference between professional or university study, what's the difference between mid-terms, exam, pop quiz, and so on.*

Veronika: *…while I for example have a single mother, and when I told my mother that I wanted to enrol in college, she first thought it was my whim and when I told her that I was accepted, that I wanted to go to college, she didn't really, she wasn't really thrilled with my idea and I can say that at one point she wanted to stop me from going to college because like, we have a difficult financial [situation].*

Unfavourable financial situation of the interviewed students' families is reflected in the parents' concern for the organization of basic living needs - accommodation and food. It is stressed that many parents are not employed, and therefore depend on other possibilities of financing the studies:

Veronika: *…she first started bombarding me with questions, like: "How am I going to finance your accommodation, what are you going to eat there, how am I going to give you pocket money, for all that."*

Veronika: *We don't have the means to pay for that accommodation and then students from the majority population complain about our rights, when in fact they're not aware of the difficulties we face during our studies, our whole life, with employment or anything.*

Snježana: *The most important thing is finances. I know it's not all about the money which I always, like I always say, but believe me, you know yourself, it's very hard to live without money 'cause you have to think about food, you have to think about the dorm you have to pay, you have to think about how I'm going to go to home to Međimurje today. I mean, I have to think about what I'll wear because …*

Veronika: *Our, most of the Roma parents are unemployed and we're really dependent on that scholarship we get.*

Also frequently mentioned is the language issue and situations in which it presents a source of discrimination. But language itself was not an obstacle to studying:

> **Snježana:** *I think that language hinders us by, for example when I talk to my family I speak both Croatian and Romani, and when I talk to my friends I know that it's not cultured and it's not nice to talk in public because then they think I'm talking about them behind their back, then everyone they shut up and listen, first of all it's interesting to them, and secondly they laugh, on one hand they laugh, wow what kind of language is that.*
>
> **Researcher:** *Yes. But language in higher education in terms of studying was not a problem for you?*
>
> **Snježana:** *You mean Croatian? Not really.*
>
> **Researcher:** *Yes.*
>
> **Snježana:** *Well, we were just talking outside that we could work on the vocabulary, like to make it a bit richer because we are after all, I mean, our occupations are such that we have to talk, express ourselves a little better.*

Nonetheless, they also see their belonging to the Roma national minority as an incentive for successful education, emphasizing the change in attitudes towards them due to the fact that they study, but also the importance of self-esteem on account of their ethnicity:

> **Veronika:** *…and now that I've come to the faculty, I mean I can say that I feel like a new person as far as Croatian society is concerned because everyone really accepted me, like they saw that I was different because I was, since I'm going to college and all that, but again, on the other hand, I hear like: "Well, you're a human being like us, like why wouldn't we accept you, like why is it so strange to you?", because sometimes I like to tell them what the situation is like in Međimurje, and what in Slavonia, how much they accepted me, and the people of Međimurje like, even today there're these, I mean there're still these prejudices and stereotypes towards the Roma.*
>
> **Snježana:** *The second obstacle is that if someone doesn't have self-esteem, if he doesn't have the ability, if he doesn't have the will, I mean, there's nothing without the will. He only has to have the will, the desire to finish it and we have to, we have to think that we're someone, and not just give up on ourselves because we're Roma, I am Roma, I won't achieve nothing. No. Precisely because I'm Roma, I want to achieve those goals that, which others think I won't.*

Institutional prerequisites and obstacles to studying

Discrimination is the most prominent obstacle to the successful study of female Roma students at the level of the institutions where they study. In this matter, the negative effects of positive discrimination are equally prominent, because they also create discomfort during their studies:

> **Snježana:** *They don't say it to me, and they say one thing, sorry, they say one thing: "Look, I don't think you're a Gypsy. You are a Roma." And I say, "Sorry, but what's the difference between a Gypsy and me as a Roma?" They say: "I mean, Gypsies are the ones who beg, who steal, who do illegal things, and Roma are, like you are." I tell them, "I'm sorry, I don't see that difference. I am also a Gypsy, however you wanna call it, no matter if a man begs, he begs so that he doesn't steal, begs because they don't have because there's no other choice because they will not leave the children hungry."*
>
> **Snježana:** *I encountered this in college, I mean, discrimination. They say that it's positive discrimination, but very uncomfortable for me. Because regardless of whether it is a positive discrimination or not, everyone looks at me again 'cause I'm Roma, the only in my year… But everyone is like, the professors are, they know that we're from all over the world, from all over, we have from Albania, everywhere, we really are 'cause there's like a hundred and ten of us in the same year, just full-time students, but*

colleagues yes, my colleagues really, really talk when I can hear them, doesn't matter that we're close, with colleagues, with friends, they talk, but they simply forget that I'm Roma and on one occasion, not on one occasion but many times I remind them: "Listen, please don't, I'm embarrassed."

Problems with discrimination or bad attitude of teachers are also mentioned in the example of other Roma included in the education system:

Veronika: *Well maybe, if I understood correctly, maybe the question is about discrimination, perhaps, by the professors. I can say that at my faculty, I've never faced discrimination. I hope I never will, but I can say that I've heard such an example where a Roma woman was in college where she encountered discrimination by professors. Yes.*

As the students have mentioned, there are many obstacles to enrolment to HEIs, but a somewhat greater importance is attached to a lack of procedures and specific jurisdictions at the level of local and regional self-governments and expert institutions. The one that stands out the most is the problem with the accommodation in student or high school dormitories: the problem of applying for student accommodation, its (irregular) funding and general insecurity related to accommodation, which is not necessarily specific only to students from the Roma national minority:

Veronika: *And there's always the passing of responsibility to somebody else. For example, when some financial resources are needed: Like, I'm not in charge of that, ask the local units. The local units will tell me, ask the Ministry and so on. I had like a problem, when I enrolled in a specialist graduate study, where I had to, one year, I mean one year costs 11,000 Kuna, and I talked to the county. The county told me to contact the Ministry of Science and Education, and the Ministry of Science and Education sent me to the local unit. I stopped and said, "What now?" And then I turned to the head of the county and he, as the only Roma woman from XXXX, then he decided to help me with, with the tuition. What I said in the application for the dorm is, it's… oh I don't know…*

Veronika: *The other thing are student dorms, because the system as a system isn't always accessible to us. I mean it's always, so like, we always have that right to a dorm, but there's always a lot of conflict with the administrators and with anyone responsible in the student service. So I had problems every time, like every year I had problems with payments. We sign that contract, and then in two months they come to my door and it's like, not a threat, but like a threat in quotation marks that I'd end up on the street. And that's what I've been most afraid of all four years, I mean. Because they said, in the first year, I don't have just like now, I am a full-time, full-time student, I was in Požega where there was no student dormitory and I had to be in a high school dorm. They accepted me as a student in a high school dorm and I signed a contract and all that, in the meantime there was a problem with payment where they came to tell me like: "Look, they didn't pay for you for two months, so you must do something to make them pay as soon as possible or you'll have to leave the dorm."*

Researcher: *Oh my. The documents haven't arrived.*

Veronika: *Yes. The documents haven't arrived yet and then I'm there all wound up. I, you don't know where to go, what to do with yourself. So it's not only me that has this problem but other students as well.*

They believe that they can get help in overcoming obstacles from all faculty employees: from professors to the deans, and as a special institutional help they highlight the special rules/rights related to the Roma national minority. This primarily refers to direct enrolment to one HEI:

Veronika: *…for example, regarding faculties, what XXXX has, that they have direct enrolment…*

Snježana: *I am very satisfied and overjoyed that I had that, I didn't know otherwise that I have direct enrolment, I heard all that when I was confused about high school graduation, I didn't know where to enrol. When I heard I had direct enrolment that, I said all the doors opened for me. I have no complaints about the faculty, it's superb, really nice, all the best and what my colleague said about direct enrolment*

to other faculties, believe me, there are people, there are young people who want to enrol and they are very ambitious and want, want to mean something...

When considering the specific assistance they would need to study at the level of an institution or the system, they actually move away from the current situation and focus on the need for interventions at lower levels of education, particularly on encouraging and informing primary school students. They also consider it necessary to inform high school students about the student rights they have as members of the Roma national minority:

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

Veronika: … *I think that there should be some, I don't know in what character, in what form, but like some meetings with young people, with high school students, I don't know with whom, to inform them of their rights.*

To the "Ministry" they attribute the role of solving these problems, but on several occasions they have also singled out the efforts of the parliamentary representative for the Roma minority:

Veronika: …*which I think should be done by someone from our sector, from the Ministry it should also be a person who will 'advocate' for us. I mean again, maybe I'm not so well informed about what's being done for the Roma now, but I know for example that according to our MP, who's always organizing some meetings and informing us, like: "Well, I suggested this and that, and I'm waiting for answers." Maybe the Ministry should, well, I know that it may not be impossible, but I'm not … I mean, I don't know what is being done now, what are the proposals other than that scholarship for example and dorms.*

Areas in which they need (and partly receive) specific assistance are financial resources - most often in the form of scholarships, accommodation rights, and the possibility of direct enrolment to HEIs. However, they stress the additional need for public transport funding (meaning transport from the place of residence to the place of study - for example on weekends), providing free private lessons during studies and for the State Matura, and expanding the circle of HEIs which allow direct enrolment, which they think could ultimately provide that additional motivation for members of the Roma national minority to access the higher education system:

Snježana: … *there are those of us young people who want to enrol and are very ambitious and want, want to mean something, but the only obstacle are finances. I know, I repeat, that it's not everything, but still. That's the only obstacle that needs to be worked on a bit.*

Veronika: *I've talked to a lot of them and they say that they very rarely go home. Our Roma. And it's always a financial issue. And I think, I don't know if you'll agree with me or not, but as far as I can see, I'd like to introduce free transportation maybe. Public transportation, I mean.*

Veronika: …*but I think that there should be, for example, as far as the faculties are concerned, what they have, for example, on XXXX, that they have direct enrolment, I think that direct enrolment should also be realized at other faculties. Because I think that the number of Roma students will increase again, that they'll have that opportunity, and I think that this is an opportunity that you shouldn't miss.*

They also emphasise the shortcomings of their own high school education, which then reflect on their study success. This is primarily manifested in the poor knowledge of the English language, which presents a significant problem for one of the students who therefore thinks that funds should be allocated for foreign language courses.

Belonging to the Roma national minority is considered positive by the interviewed students in the context of the possibilities to seek and receive assistance at their faculties. Although they have not needed it yet

at their current study, they expect to receive help from professors, deans and other employees:

> **Veronika:** *I think that as soon as they see that we're Roma and that we came to the faculty, like we've made a big step in life, I immediately see this approach, that they want to help us and that they want to make it easier for us somehow.*

> **Veronika:** *Maybe if we turned to a professor, I don't know, maybe to the dean or anyone in the faculty with a certain problem, I think they'd be willing to help.*

> **Snježana:** *Like, I met him with the help of a member of parliament, because then they arranged that direct enrolment and I said ok, I was in high school, I didn't know what to do with myself and since they are coop, cooperate, the MP, actually that institution and the professor, he told me this, like when I came to the faculty, we communicated, "If you need anything you know you can always come to me, everything can be solved, any questions about the seminar, if you don't understand we are always here." And I'm, I mean if I went to the dean, for example, I think that, even though he may not know who I am, but regardless of that, he'd help me, yes.*

Communication with professors is also assessed as satisfactory, and they emphasize the openness and willingness of professors to provide assistance when necessary. However, the students are bothered by the perception that professors facilitate their studies and grade them on the basis of more lenient criteria:

> **Veronika:** *Well, I can only say that when I was in undergraduate studies, when I met a professor of psychology and sociology, and when I said that I was Roma, she immediately approached me, so, I mean, she immediately had that approach like: "If you need any help, you can always turn to me." And I went once, there were some problems with the scholarship, I don't know what exactly it was, I can't, it was in my first year, and I went to her consultation hour about a seminar and she saw that I was kinda down, she asked like: "Colleague, what happened?" Like, I tell her what's the problem, she says: "If you need anything, feel free to contact me by email and come here."*

> **Veronika:** *…I heard a question when I was still in college: "Do the professors make it easier for you during oral exams?" And I'm listening, and I'm like, "What?" I said, "Why would they? I am a student just like everyone else." But when we go to oral exams, maybe you've been in college, maybe you studied, you must always have a witness during the exam, during the examination. So like, for me that was kind of. A demeaning question.*

For students from the Roma minority, their own ethnic origin sometimes presents an aggravating circumstance among other students, and they say that they are afraid of whether they will be accepted in the society. On the other hand, they have sometimes found themselves in situations where they had to clarify and "disclose" their ethnic origins, and where they almost had to justify themselves because of the special rights they have as members of the Roma national minority:

> **Snježana:** *The most, the most important thing is that we must not forget who we are, where we come from. And we must not hide from people that we, Ro, that I'm Roma. Like here, at my faculty, I am the representative for my year and when I, I had a seminar on the Constitution and then I said I was Roma and they were all: "What?" They were really shocked.*

> **Veronika:** *Surprised.*

> **Snježana:** *Surprised, 'cause you can't tell from my skin colour that I am Roma.*

> **Snježana:** *But I mean, I can see from the example from my faculty that it's not. So I'm a person, I believe that all educated, educational students, students that they're, that no difference can be seen. It's just a problem, because the fear is very like, present. Will they accept me or won't they accept me.*

The experience of discrimination from fellow students was reported by one of the interviewed students, while the other said that she was never in such a situation and that she received only support and help

from other students:

> **Snježana:** *And unfortunately, I've heard discrimination, regardless of what I said to them, how we national, national minorities have great rights and how we allow ourselves a lot and do whatever we want. Just yesterday, I can tell you that I, we had a class where we talked about national minorities and what really hit me because my colleagues said some things that hurt me a lot, and everyone knows that I like to talk and that I'll end up telling them what, what they have coming and I was hurt that people think that Roma, they said, they said that Roma are not, are not social, and that like, that they're grouped into their own groups.*
>
> **Veronika:** *I can say that I have a situation where we help each other. So, as I said at the beginning, I mean, I don't have such a discriminatory environment around me and other colleagues, I see that they respect me and that they never, like they don't see me as a Roma but as a normal student, so as a normal human, like they see me as a human, not as a Gypsy or a Roma as my colleague just said. So we always help each other and that's it.*

Performance and study satisfaction

Both respondents are satisfied with their studies - one of them primarily because of the profession she chose and the employment opportunities in that profession. They have also noticed a different and more positive attitude towards them in the society in general, and in their community precisely because they study:

> **Veronika:** *Well with the study I can say that I'm satisfied. As soon as I enrolled, just to tell you one positive side, that not everything is so negative. I see that Croatian society, even in my village, meaning in the Međimurje County, in the village where I live, that they look at me differently than like before when I was in high school. I see that they have like a different approach to me and all that because I'm like in college. With the faculty itself, I am satisfied…*
>
> **Snježana:** *And I'm happy, satisfied and I know that I'll have a job…*

Concerns regarding studies are related to job insecurity after graduation for one of the students, who in this aspect counts on positive discrimination when looking for a job, i.e. giving precedence to members of national minorities, although she expresses doubts about the application of this principle:

> **Veronika:** *With the faculty itself, I'm satisfied, with the whole range I may not be so satisfied 'cause it's not so in demand in the labour market. I'm comforted by what the Constitutional Law says about national minorities that we have precedence in employment among, as a Roma. Now not to prolong, as stated in the law, and in the main, but again no matter what, I somehow feel insecure. Because I think that for example now when I go, when I'll be applying for a job in the profession one day, and I think that when I go, that is, when two people apply for that same job, me and someone else, that they'll sooner take that person over me because I am Roma minority. Because you know yourself that there is discrimination.*

Both students expect to finish their studies because they feel a responsibility on account of the effort, time and money they invested. One of them has said that she already completed her undergraduate study, and that she also wanted to reach the end at her current graduate level. The other student, who is currently in the lower years of study, mentioned that later she wanted to continue onto the master's level, but only after getting a few years of work experience:

> **Snježana:** *I think, I believe in myself that I'll finish because that's actually my goal and it would be a shame to waste all this money and time and knowledge because it'd be really sad if I didn't finish now. And I'll do my best, I have the will to finish.*
>
> **Veronika:** *Well, since I have already completed one study, that is, an undergraduate study in January,*

with the title of the final paper "XXXX" with special emphasis, with special emphasis on the Roma community, so I hope to graduate this year already.

Snježana: *I plan on going on to the Master's, but like I said, after working for a few years 'cause the hospital won't…*

Researcher: *Recognise…*

Snježana: *Recognise it 'cause there's still no competences, like, for a nurse. This is a question of…*

One student was thinking about giving up her studies. The reasons for this were insecurity and adaptation to the new environment, problems with certain courses at the faculty, and insecurities with the dorm accommodation during studies. The motivation for continuing her studies, beside the support of family members, comes precisely from the fact that she is a member of the Roma national minority who will have a university education and better chances in life:

Veronika: *…I wanted to give up college at the very beginning. Of course, it was difficult to adapt to the new environment. I wanted to give up after the first week, but thank God I have a brother-in-law from the majority population who talked me out of that idea because he asked me just one question about the Roma population, like what if I didn't finish it now, I would have to face the same problems as my peers and I saw that he was right and I continued my studies. Also, I had great difficulty with English and I complained to my colleague who helped me a lot with English, and I said, "If I don't pass English, I will give up." […] Well, this was during my problems with the dorm when I was really on edge, will I, won't I and I knew, so even if I leave that dorm that I can't pay for private accommodation and that I'll have to give up college and that's it.*

Another student only stressed the postponement and difficulties with certain courses as something that is common to all students, including her, but she did not explicitly state that she was thinking about giving up her studies.

The respondents also differ on the topic of study mobility: while one states that she would like to go to Erasmus, but that it is not possible because of her difficulties with foreign languages, the other says that she has no interest in going abroad, but her reasons are connected with the profession, lack of labour force in Croatia and her own employment, and not with experience during the studies:

Veronika: *Well, to tell you honestly, if I knew a foreign language, I would've gone long ago. You mean Erasmus? Yes, I would've gone to Erasmus a long time ago, because it's, I heard from the experiences of other students when we had a lecture for this Erasmus, I mean those experiences are perfect, like ideal and if I knew a foreign language, I would've gone to Erasmus a long time ago. But that's what's stopping me.*

Snježana: *I already said that I wouldn't go, I must be one of the few who, not because I'm not good with the foreign language, but because, everything can be learnt, like I said, but I wanna stay here 'cause I know there aren't any nurses.*

Life during studying

When assessing their life during studies, the Roma students mostly talked about obstacles related to their poorer financial status. They said that they did not have enough financial resources to keep up with the student life, and they also described difficulties in trying to find student jobs due to the discrimination of potential employers on the grounds of their ethnicity:

Snježana: *I mean, I have to get coffees with the others, I have to go for coffee, I have to go somewhere 'cause there's not enough time to go to the apartment, to the room, I mean I have to spend my days, and that costs money 'cause you can't tell the girls: "Listen, like I can't go with you today because I don't have any money." This is another problem.*

> **Veronika:** *For example, I encountered a problem in the Međimurje County. As a student, I went to the store to ask for a student job. And at the info desk she said OK, and I gave them my contact. And of course, my last name in Međimurje County is known as a Roma name. […] In Međimurje County, I mean in one store. […] And she said that, we really need students, it was that pre-Christmas time and I gave her my number and now I'm waiting for them to call me because they said they need people and I'm waiting and waiting, it's been a week and no call and my boyfriend came, my boyfriend is from the majority population, and we like go to that store and I say, "Please go to the info desk and ask for a student job", just to see what's the problem, 'cause I, I'm thinking I already know what the problem was. And he goes to ask for a student job, gives his contact and that's it. And the next working day, they already call him. And I go ballistic. It was Christmas Eve, they call him again. I couldn't believe it. And now, a few days ago, they called him again, and he told them he was no longer in the area, like they could cross him off the list. I went to another store there in Čakovec, and the manager came, shook my hand and all that, everything's great like we really need students now, she went behind the counter to get a piece of paper, wrote my contact number and in the meantime she asks me something 'bout the shifts and I say just a moment to check with my brother if he can drive me and I turn around, my brother is light-haired, like you can really tell he's Roma, I turn and ask: "Will you be able to drive me?" and I'm still speaking Croatian, he says: "Yes." And I can already see that she's withdrawn, that she gave up. And I gave her a normal name and surname and here she already knew that I was Roma and I waited for that call and in fact she never called me again.*

Another obstacle during their studies is an inadequate schedule, which means that they lose a lot of time during the day. But they think it is a problem for other students as well.

A significant role in their lives during the studies is played by their family. The students receive financial support from the families - as much as possible, as well as emotional support, but one of the students stressed that this was not always the case:

> **Veronika:** *Well, at the beginning of my studies I can say that I didn't really have much support, the only support I had was from the brother-in-law I mentioned earlier. Well, that support actually, I only got from my family later on, when they saw that like, in fact that, in fact I promised them that I'd, that I, how can I say this, anyway the financial thing was the problem and then I promised them that I would get by on the scholarship which was like, 'cause they, I mean my mum was afraid of where she'd get the pocket money or other things, when she saw that I had the right to a scholarship and free accommodation, but still it was like where am I gonna get the money for your trips home or someth'n. I said that I would get by with the scholarship and really, I mean I stretched that scholarship out as much as I could. Then later when they saw that they didn't really have problems with me, then they I got some kind of support which was funny, sad actually, that I got it later when they saw that they didn't have problems with me, that they gave me that support. When I told my mother that I would enrol in plus two years, she said to me like: "Jesus, like, what do you need that much school for, like, go get a job already and enough with all this schooling", and she doesn't really realise, I mean she doesn't understand that it doesn't matter that I finished college, and that once I try to get a job it won't really be that easy to get one.*

Changes in the attitudes of family members are often associated with the rationalization related to better opportunities of finding a job after graduation, but also with the fact that many study costs are covered by the scholarship to which they are entitled as members of the Roma national minority:

> **Snježana:** *I said, look, from what I've heard, it's easier to get a job when you're, when you have a degree, in fact when you have higher education 'cause one day like the health system is such that you must be constantly educated and various educations are needed and such, and great, my family is always there to help me as much as they can financially. They do their best, but I mean, I rely on the scholarship and it's a really, it's a big, it means a lot when…*

Researcher: *Help.*

The 1,300 HRK[3] scholarship that both students receive is often not enough for all the costs of student life - as mentioned earlier, they often do not have the money to keep up with the social activities of other students, and financial resources are sometimes insufficient to meet their student obligations. In that case, their solution is to work during the study in order to earn additional funds – that is, when they manage to find work, considering the previously described experiences with the prejudice of potential employers:

Veronika: *Yes. I told you, I really depend on the student scholarship and it's really hard, it's hard to live on, with 1,300 Kuna, but it was 1,000 these previous years, from the first to the third, from the first to the third year I had a state scholarship of 1,200 and then during the fourth year I got 1,000 Kuna for the Roma. Well I think, it's really hard to be a student with just a scholarship. I had no help from my parents, that is, from my mother. I tried to get a job on a student contract, but I didn't succeed. I worked illegally in a fish market, I mean, when I had, when I had to, when I had the costs of the final paper, so I had to get some money 'cause I didn't want to write no requests to anyone and spend three or four months begging for 700 Kuna for the final paper and other expenses so I went to work in that fish market and it was something like December, where was I, it was horrible, but you know, all in all, I defended the final paper successfully and at least achieved that goal, yes.*

Both students currently live in student dormitories, with one assessing the accommodation as adequate for student needs, while the other is not satisfied, but refuses to talk about the problems:

Snježana: *I'm satisfied although I have the right, I mean I have the right to, I can choose XXXX, but as for the distance from the faculty I am satisfied even though it's not renovated, but it's great for me, it's important that I have, like I'm modest, I don't need any luxury. What is luxury to me if I'm not there and it's far away, but yes I'm satisfied.*

When they compare their lives with the lives of other students, they mostly consider it worse, i.e. more difficult, mostly because of the unfavourable financial situation and the responsibility they feel on account of the scholarship and other rights they have:

Veronika: *I can say that, unlike other students from my year, I study more because they kinda neglect it: "I'll just take it next time", or: "Oh, I'll just bluff my way through." And here they are today in the fifth year, while I feel guilty if I don't study, I know that I have an exam and I'll skip that one day when I planned to study, I'll feel guilty and I think that in this way I'm more responsible than them. 'Cause they're always counting on their parents, like they're there as parents who will give them money, pay for that course, I mean that credit transfer, which I for example the state pays for me 'cause they pay for my dorm and I want to as soon as possible, like pass all my exams so I can be of benefit to the community as soon as possible, and not a burden to the state, while for example other students are there who rely on their parents like, their parents will give them, their parents will pay for accommodation and that credit transfer and the year and all. While I, for example, don't have those opportunities and I really have to work hard for the goal that I'll achieve.*

The closeness with the family is the next thing they mention, because they feel more connected to their families than to other students, so being away from them is even harder:

Snježana: *…but we're, our parents always wanna see us. I don't know. How do I put this?*

Veronika: *We're more connected with our parents.*

Veronika: *I really see my family very, very rarely. When I was an undergraduate I had lectures, I had*

[3] According to the students, the scholarship amount was increased on the request of the MP – Roma representative.

> *to study, I had a pop quiz every week and I had to study every week, I only saw my family every three months. So, yes there's also the ticket that was some 300 Kuna plus food on the way, that's around 350 and I couldn't really afford it. I went home every three months…*

In other respects, they consider themselves equal to their peers and talk about the problems with lectures and the organization of studies that are the same for all full-time students:

> **Snježana:** *But all in all, I think we're on the same level as the majority population because we all have the same goal, we have the same problems. We're students, I mean there's not much difference there…*

Conclusion and suggestions

Since only two female students from the Roma national minority participated in this research, their answers are just an indication of some of the difficulties that members of this group face when entering the higher education system.

During the conversation, the need to inform Roma families about the importance of including the Roma in the education system was repeatedly emphasized. Since the students themselves faced a negative perception of their studies from family members, they believe that children should be encouraged to think about continuing their education already in the primary school, and that their parents should also be accustomed to the idea so that they would not resist. The students think that another potential incentive to the continuation of education can be found in informing young Roma about the opportunities and rights they have due to their status – such as scholarships, accommodation and direct enrolment to HEIs. They emphasize the role of political representatives in informing and ensuring these rights, and advocating for a greater inclusion of the Roma in the education system. All of the above would actually represent a comprehensive information campaign at the level of the state that would include different stakeholders, from local self-governments, expert institutions (e.g. schools) and civil society organisations to government institutions like the line ministries and the media.

The lack of financial resources is a pronounced difficulty that these female students face during their studies. Roma families are often at a high risk of poverty (Kunac et al., 2018), so these students could be classified as vulnerable students due to their poor socioeconomic status, and it is very uncertain whether they could study at all if there were no scholarships and other incentives that alleviate their financial situation. In addition to the very modest financial support from their families, the students primarily cover their expenses through scholarships and occasional student jobs, which makes it very difficult for them to keep up with the student life of their colleagues. The interviewed students additionally emphasized the need and the proposal to supplement the mentioned incentives with the funded transportation from the place of residence to the place of study, and pointed out that the funding of foreign language courses and private lessons would be useful for them to keep up with the study programmes more successfully, and to make up for some of the content which were not adopted in secondary school.

The experience of discrimination has been frequent and particularly emphasized in the institutional context. From their own experience or by using the example of other Roma students, the interviewed students describe study experiences in which they most often have negative interactions with other students. They state that even positive discrimination is not pleasant for them because it also causes negative reactions from their surroundings, and such affirmative action can lead to a further process of othering when it comes to the members of the Roma national minority. They worry about being accepted in the society, although they have noticed positive changes brought on by the fact that they are students. However, they believe that, at their faculties, they can get help and support from professors, administrative staff and heads of the institutions. Language is not an obstacle to studying, but there is an awareness of the need to expand their vocabulary. The use of the Romani language is mostly limited to the communication within the family, but sometimes it stimulates the interest of fellow students, which these students see as a positive interaction.

The general recommendation that arises from these interviews refers to the need for a two-sided sensitization of the social environment: of the study environment and the family /the Roma community. The mere inclusion in higher education is a big step towards the less-prejudiced acceptance of persons of the Roma national minority by the majority population, but further (intercultural) activities aimed at connecting different cultural and ethnic environments are also necessary. Efforts are further needed in the Roma community itself, primarily in raising awareness of the benefits of their inclusion in the education system.

The specific recommendations that can be singled out are mostly related to the pronounced need to inform all the involved stakeholders about the relevant issues: from the immediate family of the Roma involved in the higher education system, through the entire Roma community - especially children in primary and secondary schools, to HEI employees and educational authorities. Also important is the need for additional sensitization of institutional employees to the problems faced by members of the Roma national minority, but also of providing more information on the special rights that are guaranteed to them. Special attention should be paid to various modalities of scholarships, to enabling direct enrolment to HEIs, providing accommodation in student dormitories - both for full-time and part-time students, as well as encouraging and enabling attendance of courses and private lessons that would compensate for the possible shortcomings of previous stages of education, and enable a more successful study experience. On the other hand, one should be careful that specific affirmative actions do not run contrary to the idea of inclusion that these measures are based on, in order to avoid amplifying the othering with regard to the members of the Roma national minority.

5.2.2. Students with asylum/refugee status[4]

On study selection

Students with asylum/refugee status are enrolled in the faculties of the University of Zagreb, mostly in the social sciences and humanities. Besides one asylee/refugee who is yet to enrol, others are senior students or are enrolled in one-year M.A. programmes. All students with asylum status who participated in the research are men, and come from Middle Eastern countries.[5]

As reasons for choosing the studies, these students almost exclusively state that they decided on a programme in order to continue their studies from earlier, i.e. the studies they attended in their country of origin. Still, one of the students adds that one of the reasons for continuing his studies was to help others and achieve a better future, while the other mentions the possibility of finding a better job (notes from the interview with Kasim):

> **Omar:** *…because I already studied law and political sciences in my country.*
>
> **Ahmet:** *…to continue where I stopped when I left Turkey.*
>
> **Omar:** *… which is why I think that I would be more useful to my people and my future, if I continue my education here in Croatia and finally graduate from political sciences [which I started] in Iraq. […] …so all this would be helpful to me and at the same time I would be helping others.*

Belonging to the group of students with the asylum status was either not singled out as an obstacle to choosing studies, or their motivation was to get involved in the educational process since there are not many asylees/refugees who enrol in studies in Croatia:

> **Omar:** *I was a refugee and I got the status, but this wouldn't stop me from finishing and continuing my education, and my dream.*
>
> **Omar:** *At the same time, as you know, there aren't many people from our region who love to study and who enrol in studies here, which is why I think that I would be more useful to my people and my future.*

Study success – prerequisites and obstacles to study success

Personal prerequisites and obstacles to studying

In addition to emphasizing general individual characteristics such as diligence, perseverance or motivation as the main prerequisite for successful studying, students who were granted asylum emphasize that just taking that step towards tertiary education, and especially enrolling and starting study, is a success, particularly for students with asylum status:

> **Omar:** *So, I think that if someone just starts thinking or takes a step towards starting their studies, they've*

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[4] According to a Eurydice report, during the acad. year 2017/2018 Croatia recorded four students with asylum/refugee status (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). Students from this vulnerable group have the right to higher education under the same conditions as Croatian citizens, including the opportunity to apply for a state scholarship as well as to work on a student contract - the right to work on a student contract was disabled in the period from the time when the current Student Affairs Act came into force until the last amendment to the same Act (Official Gazette, no. 96/18 and 16/20). Students with asylum/refugee status can have their dormitory accommodation co-financed in accordance with a special decision (they must write to the MES to issue a special decision), or they can be given the right to dormitory accommodation if they do not gain that right in another way.

[5] In general, gender structure of persons who have been granted protection in Croatia is mostly skewed towards men. From the total of 795 cases of granted international protection in the period from 2006 to September 2020, 523 (65.8%) were men (Source: Croatian Ministary of the Interior, https://mup.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/statistika/2020/Me%C4%91unarodna%20za%C5%A1tita/Web%20statistika%2001.01.%20-%2030.09.2020..pdf).

already succeeded. Even if they would finish or take a little more time, due to the economic situation, the language and the fact that all this is difficult, for me even if you just started, just set out, hats off to you.

Amir: *Yes, yes, we have to learn, I mean, for me it's very stupid to wake up in the morning and not have a goal, not have anything new to learn. So yes. For me, I always have a desire to, to study, to continue. For example, now I'm thinking about when I'll finish my graduate study and then go for a PhD, if, if the circumstances allow. And when I finish my PhD, I'll also, I don't know, enrol in something else and so on. I have a goal. To keep going.*

In addition to these personal characteristics, they emphasize the importance of the support of close/important people and the support of the general surroundings:

Ahmet: *Yes, and I agree with him that learning is important in that case. But being a successful student from your question doesn't just depend on people and that they really have to work hard, nor on that representative. They need to get support from the surroundings, from people, the state or the university, and that's really important.*

Students with asylum status think that most individual factors that make it difficult for them to study are directly and indirectly connected with their status:

Omar: *…and you're in my situation, I'm talking about the situation when you're an asylum seeker or a refugee, because you really have big problems in life.*

The most prominent difficulty – the difficult financial situation – reflects on the study success through compulsory employment, i.e. working while studying in order to cover basic costs of living:

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

Omar: *In my case, since I'm paying for my study, I have to pay fifty thousand for this graduate study and, yes, help with the payment is possible, but I haven't really asked for it, because I have a job here and you know it's very hard to save money with such a small salary.*

Amir: *I lost my job, I used to work in McDonald's and I was happy and I could, I could combine everything with my schedule, but now I'm financially, I don't know how I'll live.*

Working while studying, which is the only source of income for most of these students, also brings some other challenges and obstacles for students with asylum status. One of them is traveling from one place to another for study (and work), and there is also the collision of work and study obligations:

Omar: *Later on it was difficult because I worked in one, and the faculty was in a different town.*

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

Omar: *Generally, work comes first, and it's difficult to coordinate my time between the faculty and work.*

However, the biggest problem related to working and studying is not being able to work through the Student Services, due to the fact that the Student Affairs Act (Official Gazette, no. 96/18), which was current at the time, did not include students from third countries in the definition of students (i.e. students from European Higher Education Area, the European Economic Area and the Swiss Confederation nor students under international protection in the Republic of Croatia).[6] This issue is discussed in more detail in the segment on the analysis of institutional barriers.

[6] In the meantime, based on the draft Act on Amendments to the Student Affairs Act, with the final proposal from the 16th January 2020, an amendment was made to the Student Affairs Act (Official Gazette, no. 96/18 and 16/20) that "proposes harmonization with the regulations of the Republic of Croatia that enable the work of third-country nationals - The Aliens Act (Official Gazette, no. 130/11, 74/13, 69/17 and 46/18), as well as regulations that ensure equal rights in higher education for persons under international and temporary protection - Act on International and Temporary Protection (Official Gazette, no. 70/15 and 127/17)".

In addition to the impossibility of employment through the Student Service, students with asylum status also mentioned the problem with the realization of the legally-guaranteed right to financial assistance for asylees/refugees, which is given only to the unemployed. The Employment Service very rarely takes student status into consideration when looking for possible jobs, so it is often difficult to reconcile work and study obligations. Furthermore, full-time student status means that the person is no longer registered as unemployed and therefore loses the right to cash benefits:[7]

> **Ahmet:** *When you receive asylum status, you receive state aid from the Social Welfare Center. So, this help from the state only works if you're unemployed in the system so now I have to send an e-mail to the person from the Employment Service who is handling my case. They're just looking for jobs that I can get, but she's familiar with my situation with studying and trying to enrol in the university so she's not actually looking for a job for me, but I have to send her an email every month that I'm still studying and going to the university. As I understand things, she expects me to enrol in university as a full-time student and once I become a full-time student I cannot be unemployed in Croatia…*
>
> **Ahmet:** *Such is the rule that, when I don't have an unemployed status, as I learned from a conversation with my Employment Service contact in my weak Croatian, I must be registered as unemployed in order to receive the 800 Kuna of state aid.*

In addition to the financial aspect, students often highlight the problem of not knowing the language. This problem is directly related to the study itself, i.e. the inability to study in another language - for example in English, or the unavailability/collision with the Croatian language courses. In addition, it has been mentioned several times that the study itself and the method of education is different than in their country of origin:

> **Ahmet:** *So the first hurdle was the language, so I'm still struggling and wrestling with it. And as soon as I finish this semester, I hope to enrol in some courses in Croatian so I can better keep up with the literature.*
>
> **Ahmet:** *For me, the biggest challenge was the language and I learnt it up to B1 level on my own because I couldn't balance my time to attend the course, which is a big problem and thus an obstacle to my success, because I might have been able to study law already, but first it takes time to learn the language on your own without taking a course.*
>
> **Ahmet:** *…colleagues tell me that the next semester is very difficult, and I'll also go to Croaticum, probably in the evening, and in the morning I'll study law and it's not just a matter of the law, but also the fact that I'll have to look up every word in the dictionary so I'll surely spend hours upon hours in the library and the university so I won't be able to afford to spend more time working, which will be another challenge.*

Institutional prerequisites and obstacles to studying

Studying in another country can be a big challenge: from differences in the organization of the study itself, to the language in which teaching is conducted. However, taking into account the specific situation of students who have been granted international protection, and the rights guaranteed by law, inclusion in higher education is even more challenging for this group of students. Students with asylum status in

[7] This problem is also highlighted in the draft Act on Amendments to the Student Affairs Act: "… it is important to emphasize that full-time students do not enter into employment through employment contracts. When refugees, i.e. asylees and persons under subsidiary protection as a particularly vulnerable group, enrol in full-time studies (and thus cease to be unemployed), they also lose their social protection as unemployed persons and are thus prevented from working through employment contracts as well as student contracts, that is, they lose the social support for the unemployed." (https://sabor.hr/prijedlogzakona-o-izmjeni-zakona-o-obavljanju-studentskih-poslova-s-konacnim-prijedlogom-zakona?t=114483&tid=208530).

Croatia have access to higher education under the same conditions as Croatian students, but the process of inclusion, i.e. enrolling at the faculty, presented certain problems to all research participants. First of all, the unavailability of the necessary information was emphasized, as was the untransparent process of enrolment or acknowledgement of previously acquired knowledge. The interviewees often mentioned situations when someone has to "beg" or "ask for help":

> **Omar:** *Difficult, first of all, there's nobody who can give you the right information. Every time I come to the faculty, I get different information.*
>
> **Omar:** *Also, something that doesn't help at all is that they give you a list of everything you need. To translate a degree you need about 360 Kuna for one page. I bring it, they ask me if they'll be able to understand it, and you know I don't live in Iraq and so, I arrange with the family over the phone to go to another city where I studied and bring it, and then they tell me, "Oh, no that one, we need a different degree, but we don't really use it." Anyway, after almost five months, I bring the diploma again and they say, "Okay, translate it." I pay 360 Kunas. I translate it, bring it to them and they say: "Oh, no, this translation shouldn't be like that, it should be in Latin [or in Latin script?]." For example, I studied law, ok, but it should be like legal, the law in Croatian, they need the law in Arabic…*
>
> **Omar:** *At work, the colleagues help me because they know a professor here or there, but everyone gives you different information. And in the end, you simply get lost.*
>
> **Ahmet:** *I would send an email, but you know that it's always embarrassing and really hard to ask for something from the people you know and beg them to help you. It would be much easier and simpler if there was a system I could monitor and get involved in. Instead of begging and pulling people by the sleeve to do something for you. That would be great for me.*

Language is also mentioned as a problem at the institutional level. Two students have the opportunity to study in English because of the organization of the study or the subject area, but for others, studying in the Croatian language is a big problem[8]:

> **Ahmet:** *I tried to find a way to study in English so I could just take exams and finish university. But since the study of law is very different in Croatia, it lasts five years, not three plus two, while in Turkey it's four plus two, and it's all messy, so they didn't know how to enrol me, I didn't know if I could enrol, so we started some kind of negotiation, talking to the dean and they suggested some solutions.*

At the level of the entire education system, the objection goes to the lack of procedure for the inclusion of particular groups in the education system, i.e. non-transparency of that procedure or non-compliance with the prescribed rules:

> **Omar:** *From the beginning, you know, ok, I know, that's the procedure, I respect that. That procedure is fine for your state, but you could, but what's missing, and if you're working on a project or something, they could really, some person, or some office really could give the right information so we don't, you know how many e -mails I've written to the university, to the professor XY, just to get some information.*

[8] Although there is no single provision at the level of the University or the Ministry of Science and Education on the level of knowledge of the Croatian language required for enrollment at HEIs, the University of Zagreb provides an overview of special conditions for enrollment to its constituents for a special quota of Croats outside Croatia (i.e. candidates who have completed four years of secondary education outside of Croatia), and who, due to the potential lack of knowledge of the Croatian language, can also be applied to other foreigners. While most faculties do not define the conditions related to knowledge of the Croatian language, those faculties that do so require Croatian language proficiency to be at least at level B1 (Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, Faculty of Geotechnical Engineering, Faculty of Textile Technology – also specifies level B2) or B2 (Faculty of Chemical Engineering and Technology, Faculty of Croatian Studies - also specifies levels C1 and C2, Faculty of Kinesiology, Faculty of Teacher Education). Some faculties prescribe knowledge of the "basic" level of the Croatian language (Faculty of Agriculture, Faculty of Philosophy and Religious Studies). (Source: University of Zagreb, 2018).

> **Amir:** *…me when I came here and got the asylum after two months. I said I wanted to learn the language, they said ok, we'll send your name to the Ministry and I called the Ministry, the Ministry says they have no idea what, what to do with you and you have to solve it with the police and I go to the police and they do the same, they will kick it over to Ministry and I was a year and a half without, no language course so I studied alone and I was like I don't know, should I go on or can I continue here.*

We already mentioned the problem of working through the Student Service, which was not available to students with asylum status at the time of the research. Research participants are aware of their rights related to the inclusion in the higher education system, but they see the problem in the governing structures that do not take into account their specific situation and do not adhere to the prescribed rules and procedures:

> *The problem is the law that is determined by the ministries - they do not take into account their perspective and don't mention it, but the Ministry of Education has cancelled at the parliamentary level the possibility for them (asylees) to work… he has Croatian papers, but no right to work.* (Notes from the interview with Kasim)

> **Amir:** *We're not allowed to work. And when I say that the government is against us, people don't believe me.*

> **Amir:** *I said it, when I was at the Student Services, I said: "You're now violating the Croatian Constitution." Article 45 says that all asylees have the right to work. And how is that? They say we have a new Act that says it's only for EU citizens. And I'm just asking you now, this man who put this law, what was he thinking? How, how did he do this? I just, I mean, I can't really understand it.*

They also emphasise that some institutions' employees – specifically the Student Centre - lack the awareness of their specific circumstances:

> **Amir:** *Actually for me the Student Services… Well I don't know, they're very bad, very rude. Yes. And really, I wouldn't go there anymore, but what can I do, I have to go. If I'll get the chance to get a student contract. Yes. Yes, I mean at the level of Student Service, they're really bad. And when they see that I am a foreigner or an asylee or I don't know something, then they're twice as bad and worse, yes.*

However, the students also mentioned the help they received from the institution in overcoming the obstacles they face. This is most often in the form of a tuition waiver, or a Croatian language course at Croaticum. They have also noticed a positive attitude of the faculties' heads and other employees, as well as the professors towards them, and the desire to help them:

> **Ahmet:** … *we get a lot of encouragement from people, from my friends, people from the faculty, they all want to do something.*

> **Amir:** *Yes, I think people here like the employees, professors, dean, vice dean, they're very open, they always want me to, I mean, to talk at my faculty. I have really great experience with them and I'm very satisfied and I know very well how limited they are. And they always try and give their best and best.*

But not all experiences of support provided by the HEIs are positive. Some students warn of the limitations that their faculties face in facilitating the studies of students with asylum, which arise from the functioning of the overall system:

> **Amir:** *I think the faculty is very limited in what it can do. They don't have I think the possibility that they will ease the situation with us. The faculty is affiliated with the Ministry. It's simple. I've talked about it a lot, I've talked to reporters, I've been here since 2015 and I know what the situation is and in fact I'm not optimistic at all. Yes, I mean the fact, simply, the problem is in politics here, the entire country and the entire government says that refugees and asylum seekers are not welcome. So, there's no focus. Simply that if they wanted to solve it, they could solve it tomorrow, if a new government comes.*

As something that would facilitate the study experience for students with international protection, the research participants primarily mention the availability of information, primarily those gained through

personal contact with HEI staff, other students or acquaintances: on the entire study process and the enrolment procedures. In this light, in addition to the institution/faculty and the system as a whole, they recognize the role that they themselves play, or rather students who have already gone through these experiences and can share them with others who are just getting involved or who want to get involved in the higher education system. It is important to point out that the difficulties are mainly related to enrolment:

> **Omar:** *But the most important thing, if you want to do it, in this project, is to really make the right information available to everyone...*
>
> **Ahmet:** *It would be helpful for me to know someone who could give me accurate information. I really try to contact and gather as much information as I can from anyone I know, like one day from a colleague from the faculty, the next day from my professor, but I don't have a direct contact with someone really relevant.*
>
> **Omar:** *OK, we've already started the classes, we're already studying so we're done with that most difficult thing, now we're students so maybe if you could form a group for people who have been studying for a while and see who they are, because they don't have the information that we have now, ok, so it might be useful for them because, there are a lot of things we didn't mention because it's not a problem for us anymore.*
>
> **Ahmet:** *…it would've been really helpful if I could've asked friends before, it really helps to see people who've already gone through the suffering we are going through now, let's put it this way, it was really hard for me at first to focus by myself, to learn a language, and you're really looking for someone who'll tell you that it's possible, and now that I see my friend speak Croatian really well, it really encourages me, so I think it would be very nice, I don't know, if there was some kind of connection, networking, so to speak, but a student who studied law before and is now studying here at European Studies in English, I'll probably try to get in touch with him and I'd love to help if there're people coming after me, trying to do something, I'd love to help and that would be like, I don't know, part of an institution or something.*

At the level of the institution, they warn of the employees' lack of sufficient and relevant information, which can often be very confusing, and point to the need for a special office to deal with the problems they face, but also the importance of educating staff to enable a greater visibility of this group of students:

> **Omar:** *Also, it's the same with the integration programme, it shouldn't be that if we make a mistake somewhere or don't know something, they just tell us, "You don't know." Because integration should be for people who are in charge or in a position to deal with us, because when you go there, they'll just see the refugees, they, they, ok, even they want to help, but don't know what it means, because it's new and twenty years ago the last refugees were from Bosnia, and now there's the problem of language as well and with other things that are different than with us. So, they should have workshops for them, inform them what's what, we don't know if we have the right or not, we know the law better than they do, because when we came here, we came because we knew we had the right to do so.*
>
> **Omar:** *But they have no information. I know they're confused and they start calling and they don't know who's the source of the information, and they call you, you know, and you have to wait and we get lost in it.*
>
> **Ahmet:** *We have an office for international cooperation that deals mainly with Erasmus students, students who are coming as part of mobility, Croaticum students, but there's no specific person or branch of the faculty that would take my case and help me find me way through the system. Just the vice dean I was telling you about, who actually isn't getting back to me because he has a lot of work to do.*
>
> **Omar:** *So, to make a workshop for them to educate them, that would also be helpful so that they can deal with the situation because now there's, now there's a lot of people here.*

On the other hand, systematic guidelines, rules and regulations should be provided for this group of students that would cover the language courses intended for HEI enrolment, and the adaptation and

clarification of laws that are not completely clear to them. In their view, administrative procedures in general should be simplified:

> **Amir:** *But what, I mean in the Student Office, what will she do with me if she's limited by the law? What will she do? She'll lose her job if she helps me. It's simple. And we have to understand that. The problem's in the law. We're, as asylees we don't have a very clear law. For being here. At the level of the faculty, at the level of I don't know, anything. So yes, we need an update, yes, we need a new law.*

> **Omar:** *I did not come to ask for the impossible, I know my right so I came to this university because I have all the papers, I have the opportunity and I use it.*

> **Amir:** *At the level of the faculty or the Ministry or I don't know, I mean what the guys said is a fact, but it's not, it's not just up to us, it's up to the Croatians, they also do this. Bureaucracy in Croatia is something very normal. I mean, it's not just because we're asylees or refugees or I don't know something, Croatians struggle with them every morning, so the problem is with the bureaucracy. They like certificates, they like documents…*

Another specific problem that they believe should be addressed at the system level is providing meals in student restaurants, as is the case for students who are not from Zagreb, or rather provide them with more meals per day:

> **Amir:** *We have to send a request for you to accept every year and we have to wait a month or two for that. Otherwise, I'll graduate, I'll no longer need the restaurant and I got the rights now, but if you can solve it somehow and another thing, they think, your Ministry, they think that we're like from Zagreb. And we are, but we have no parents here. So we're like from here, but we're not from here.*

Students with asylum status are generally satisfied with the support they get at their faculty, and feel they have someone to turn to:

> **Amir:** *…in my opinion, Student Office is the best that I ever saw. That isn't a compliment, but it's a fact.*

But they also note that most of the difficulties disappeared after they enrolled in their HEIs, which is why they did not need to turn to anyone:

> **Omar:** *Well, after enrolling, everything gets easier, yes, no problem now. I didn't encounter any problems.*

Students with asylum status mostly assess their communication with professors as satisfactory, consider them to be friendly and available, and say that they take their needs into account. This is not entirely the case with their fellow students, with whom they usually do not have major problems, but the general impression is that there is also not much contact and communication, nor a perception that they are willing to help them with the study, which indicates a certain level of marginalization:

> *The professors are cool. They come from different areas and that's interesting. Regardless of the office hours, you can come at any time and ask.* (Notes from the interview with Kasim)

> **Omar:** *Because when I was trying to enrol in the university, I had to write some letters, I had to have them from two professors, but I communicated with professors from the Croaticum and the Faculty of Humanities, at the same time I gained other contacts, I contacted them only once and they called me later to see how I was, what was going on with me and they asked: "Can we offer you anything?", and I didn't know them from before, I met them through my friend, he knows them and they contact us, they really have good relations with professors and students and my faculty professors are also good.*

> **Amir:** *We're political sciences majors and they [students] are separate, right-wing, left-wing, so yes, yes. And there're those who, who're against me being here, they believe, I don't know, that this, isn't a place for me, that I should go on and I don't know what, but they can't do anything about it. Only blah blah and that's it. And then you turn around and if you don't like it no problem.*

> *Students don't really help with the studying.* (Notes from the interview with Kasim)

Performance and study satisfaction

Students with asylum status are generally satisfied with their studies, most notably with the study content which they consider useful for their future:

> **Omar:** *Well, I just mentioned that before, that I'm satisfied with studying because in the field that I'm studying now it's all about EU institutions.*

> **Omar:** *During my studies in my country I learned more about the Middle East which is nice, although we did learn about Europe but from a different perspective, so it's nice to look at it from a new angle, not that everything is new to me, but what I hear is new, and I feel it'll be useful for my future and in fact it is, for a time when the asylum procedure was going on, I was away from politics and it's something I don't want to hear about, but after studying it seems to me that you learn more, you hear more about the news, you listen and see what it's all about, and I think it's good for me.*

Concerns about the study and its completion are again related to the financial situation and the inability to work through the Student Services, but the students also mentioned the duration of the study, which they estimate will be longer than planned. However, students expect that, depending on the help from their families and their own motivation, they will complete the study they enrolled in:

> **Omar:** *Well, I think it'll take longer than planned, I don't think I can finish in one year for several reasons, but I still have no problem, I'll see how it goes.*

> **Amir:** *You can fund me in some way, I'll finish it and thank God, and they [parents] can, they can a little, fund a little, but the situation is also very difficult back there. And every time, they sometimes block the internet at our place, I mean at home and now it's very hard with the Western Union or with sending money or I don't know. If there's no Internet in Iraq, then I'll run out of money here because I can't work.*

For the time being, they are not really thinking about continuing their studies at a higher level. Only one student has mentioned the possibility of continuing their studies at the doctoral level. In contrast, the possibility of dropping out of the current study was considered by almost all research participants: worrying about the future, how to organize the studies and the financial situation are all stressful circumstances and encourage (or have previously encouraged) thoughts of dropping out, completely or temporarily:

> **Researcher:** *Have you ever considered giving up on trying to enrol as full-time student, before or now, for some reasons?*

> **Ahmet:** *Every day and night. Because I'm generally worried about the future and if I try to imagine what it will be like when I finish law school, how will I find a job and yes, it's very stressful and if you depend on yourself and have to deal with everything on your own, it can be a challenge in itself.*

> **Omar:** *Well, maybe not long-term, but, it's something that's maybe personal and I don't like to give up on anything that I set my mind on, just like this plan to go to the university.*

The interviewed students are currently not planning to go on mobility abroad (during their studies), primarily because of work obligations, but also the approved asylum/refugee status. One of the interlocutors came to Croatia as an Erasmus exchange student, but the others considered these options and concluded that they would not leave Croatia while studying:

> **Omar:** *In my situation, I'm not thinking about anything outside of Croatia, for many reasons, my job, my life, my girlfriend. I'm only thinking that… I think I see myself here because I have status here and this is my second home so… that's what I'm going to get.*

> **Ahmet:** *When I started talking to the faculty and, I forgot what it's called, the international office (for international cooperation), they asked me if I'd go to Erasmus from Croatia to some other place, I thought "Well yes, why not, Erasmus is fun", but later I decided that if I left Croatia for the next six months*

and came back to learn the language, it would not be good for me. So, in short-term no, I should stay here for at least three or four years until maybe I get a permanent residence.

Life during studying

Despite all these problems, students with asylum status are satisfied with their lives, and especially with the people they are in contact with, as well as the fact that they are able to study. They also noted their satisfaction with the level of the Croatian language they had mastered[9]:

Amir: *But otherwise, we're satisfied. Yes. Now we've talked about, I mean, how much problems we have. We don't know what, but otherwise, otherwise we're generally happy here.*

… meets kind, polite and friendly people at the XXXX faculty. He has nice friendships with many people and is interested in meeting new people. He feels happy in this environment. (Notes from the interview with Kasim)

The only problem with the student life that they singled out was work, which is also reflected in the changes they want to make in their life during studies, such as a better financial situation, more time for learning and opportunities to study in their mother tongues:

Ahmet: *Here, one of the things I wanted was to work. I worked for the company for nine months. I've never worked before in my life and my first job ever was in Croatia and during that time, while I was trying to figure out how to enrol in university and there were no Croatian courses, so you want to do something and so I worked for nine months, but I really think that it took a lot of my time, and actually I don't really like working while studying, that's reasonable as long as we're not forced into it by the situation of really great poverty.*

Omar: *I would definitely like more free time so I can study more. You can't live without work and at the same time you can't study with work, so if you work for five days and you have to study during the weekend, and you also have other things for the weekend, you have your life, so time is really most important, there's not enough time to do everything, so I'd like resources that would allow me to have more time to study because it's very interesting to me what I'm studying now but the problem is that I just have to sit and study.*

Almost all the students have the support of family and people close to them, but this support is more emotional than financial, because not even their parents are able to provide such support:

He has their emotional support, not financial. They wish him all the best in life, encourage and stimulate him. His friends in Croatia always support him in spirit, encourage him to continue, because it's good for his future. (Notes from the interview with Kasim)

Omar: *I have great support, emotional, not financial from my co-workers. They give it to us, they helped me during my studies and before, they support me, and from my girlfriend, and of course from my family.*

Ahmet: *I haven't had any financial help from my family for the last five or six years. My dad doesn't work, my mom doesn't work, they just struggle for themselves and survive.*

During their studies, students live in rented apartments for which they pay on their own, one student lives in a state apartment that the state is legally obliged to pay for another year, and the last one is in a dormitory, is satisfied with that accommodation and considers it adequate for studying.

[9] According to the Act on International and Temporary Protection (OG 70/15, 127/17), "asylees and foreigners under subsidiary protection are obliged to attend a course on the Croatian language, history and culture for the purpose of integration in the Croatian society" (Article 74, paragraph 1), and the costs of these activities are covered from the state budget from the position of ministries responsible for education (Article 74, paragraph 3), although asylees often fund additional courses themselves due to insufficient level of Croatian language acquired from state-funded courses.

They are not fully informed about the possibilities of getting a scholarship, and in fact believe that they do not have the right and opportunity to apply for a scholarship, although they would like to[10]:

> **Ahmet:** *Scholarships, this is what I've tried to look into with my professor, and we went to the website of the Ministry of Education and scholarships are offered that are all for Croatian citizens, so we tried to figure out what might be for us, as asylees, so I don't know if I can get a state scholarship as a full-time student of the Faculty of XXXX.*
>
> **Amir:** *Two months ago I saw a scholarship announcement, only for Croats, we are not allowed to apply for a scholarship.*

When comparing their life with the life of other students, they express different opinions. While one of the students thinks that he is not different from other students, the others point out that there are big differences. They do not necessarily define them as "worse", but they emphasize the dimension of working while studying, which is not a necessity for other students, so they consider their lives to be more difficult. In addition, they state the fact that "domestic" students know the language - they study in their mother tongue, and have citizenship and families nearby:

> **Amir:** *Well it's a big difference, but… I don't think about it.*
>
> **Omar:** *Harder, but more beautiful.*
>
> **Omar:** *I'm speaking for myself. Most of the students are my friends. They live here, but they come from other towns or from Zagreb, but they're not working, so I don't know, in a way it's an easy life to just study, and not work. It's harder for me, quite harder, but my life is still easy so I don't really know what to think about a person's situation.*

Conclusion and suggestions

Students with asylum/refugee status are rare in Croatia. Those involved in higher education mostly want to continue the studies they attended in their country of origin[11]. In this process, they often encounter obstacles that are characteristic only for their group, but also some other obstacles common to all students.

In considering institutional barriers, the biggest emphasis was placed on the (un)availability of specific information regarding the enrolment process, as well as on the complications that occur during the enrolment that are specific for students with asylum/refugee status. The most obvious problems are connected with the procedure that is not defined at the level of the entire system, and with the recognition of previously acquired qualifications, which is carried over to individual constituents. However, faculty employees are not familiar with all the protocols, opportunities and rights that students with asylum status have. Experiences with the employees of their faculties - both the administrative staff and the professors - are mostly positive, and the students recognize their desire to help and accommodate them.

[10] Students with asylum status have the right to apply for all types of state scholarships provided by the Ministry of Science and Education: 1) State scholarships for students of STEM fields, 2) State scholarships for students of lower socioeconomic status, and 3) State scholarships for special groups of students (https://mzo.gov.hr/istaknute-teme/odgoj-i-obrazovanje/visokoobrazovanje/drzavne-stipendije/162). Only full-time students can apply for these scholarships. The conditions for applying for scholarships of the City of Zagreb are, among other things, that students must be citizens of the Republic of Croatia and have a registered residence in Zagreb continuously for a period of 3 years, which persons under international protection do not meet.

[11] According to a Eurydice report, during the acad. year 2017/2018, Croatia recorded four students with asylum / refugee status (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2019). One should also bear in mind that persons with asylum/refugee status who are currently completing lower levels of education, i.e. attending secondary and primary schools, will also be able to opt for inclusion in the higher education system. However, due to the somewhat longer process of their integration into Croatian society - and primarily a better knowledge of the Croatian language - it is to be assumed that their inclusion in HEIs will be somewhat easier.

The discussions gave the impression that the interviewed students are not in frequent communication with other students, and they describe this relationship more negatively than positively. However, they did not mention any experiences with discrimination due to their ethnicity.

Another problem that is characteristic for students with asylum status is the language, i.e. insufficient knowledge of the Croatian language. The possibilities of studying in English are limited, so these students must first master the Croatian language to a sufficient degree in order to be able to attend classes in Croatian. At the moment, the constituents of the University of Zagreb do not require the knowledge of the Croatian language as a condition for enrolment in study programs. Only some faculties require Croatian language proficiency at the level of B1 - B2 (and higher), but this condition primarily refers to the enrolment of Croats who studied (and grew up) outside the Republic of Croatia and want to join higher education in Croatia (University of Zagreb, 2018). Given the difficulties encountered by asylum seekers and people with asylum in Croatia regarding the legally-guaranteed Croatian language courses, such as insufficient number of hours, collisions with their jobs, inadequate course organization etc. (see e.g. Ajduković et al., 2019), it is clear that in some cases regular faculty enrolment is not possible immediately after receiving the decision on the obtained status because, at that moment, the knowledge of Croatian is not yet sufficient. Although they have a legal right (and obligation), as well as a financially-regulated possibility of learning Croatian, due to the insufficient level of knowledge that can be acquired from state-funded courses, students with asylum/refugee status often pay for additional courses themselves, which represents an additional financial burden[12].

Although financial difficulties can be attributed to the majority of the student population, the position of students with asylum/refugee status is even more specific, because most cannot count on financial assistance from their families, are not beneficiaries of scholarships, and most are not housed in dormitories or state-owned apartments, but cover the accommodation costs themselves. Although they are proud of their independence, they must work while studying in order to finance basic living needs[13], which often presents a problem in organizing student and work obligations as well as certain obstacles in looking for a job. The problem with working through the Student Services, which has been resolved in the meantime, should facilitate the possibility of finding a job, and there is an additional possibility of intervention in terms of redefining the right to more than one meal per day in student restaurants – like it is for students who are not from Zagreb. The current Action Plan for the Integration of Persons Granted International Protection for the period 2017-2019 places greater emphasis on employment as the desired result of successful integration, which is not bad in itself, but represents a certain obstacle for young people with the asylum/refugee status who want to continue their education.

Students with asylum status proposed possible solutions to the problems and difficulties they face. The most important is the availability of information and the need for clearly-defined protocols and procedures for enrolment in HEIs. In this context, they see their role as "student ambassadors" in sharing experiences with other (new) asylees who are still only planning or would like to enrol in HEIs, in order to facilitate the process - a process that they personally found the most problematic. Furthermore, information on scholarship opportunities should be more visible, as the research participants believe

[12] According to the Decision on the programme of learning the Croatian language, history and culture for asylees and foreign nationals under subsidiary protection with the aim of their inclusion in the Croatian society (OG 154/2014), the programme lasts at least 280 hours, but many researches and reports (e.g. Ajduković et al., 2019) point that the hours are not enough to acquire an adequate level of the Croatian language (especially for adults), which often has the consequence that persons who have been granted international protection fund additional Croatian language courses themselves.

[13] Most often, these were jobs regulated through student services (such as working at McDonalds), but after the changes in the possibility of working through student services for foreigners, the interlocutors looked for work through the Croatian Employment Service. Research and statistics show that persons granted international protection are most often included in labour market through low-skilled and auxiliary occupations such as kitchen assistants, warehouse assistants, etc., that do not require a high level of knowledge of the Croatian language (Ajduković et al., 2019).

that they do not meet the conditions for applying for existing scholarship calls. They also propose organizing a preparatory course of the Croatian language at the university level (such as Croaticum at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb) in order to enable future students-asylees to check and improve their knowledge of Croatian, but also to make the first contact with the university that would facilitate their inclusion in the higher education system.

5.2.3. LGBTQ+ students

On study selection

Students who participated in the research are studying or have studied at faculties of social sciences, humanities, arts, biotechnology and biomedical sciences in Rijeka and Zagreb. As the main reasons for choosing their studies, students at both universities mainly mentioned interest in the study, followed by the liberal environment of the faculties and their surroundings, especially tolerance towards LGBTQ+ people who have different sexual orientation or gender identity from the majority population. Almost all participants in the focus groups cited interest as the main reason for choosing a study, and some of them ascribed no role to the sexual orientation or gender identity. Students who cited the liberal environment as an important reason for choosing a faculty/study usually explained this by the rejection of LGBTQ+ people in the environments where they lived:

> **Neda:** *I'd like to say that it's no coincidence that people come to study in Rijeka. I didn't take the entrance exam in Zagreb, Sarajevo, Osijek, Split or anywhere else, because I'm from XXXX and I was XXXX with such an environment and wanted to move somewhere where it's more liberal. And that's Rijeka.*

> **Helena:** *So, I didn't choose the faculty based on the study programme, but on the city, because I'm from a small, small village near a larger town, mostly, where it's not… They are not really humane as far as LGBT people are concerned, it's not like they accept it, I just didn't see any future in continuing to study' in that larger town which is near the village. As for [the faculty], just like Natalija, I'm glad to be at the faculty that is famous for its liberalism, I don't know, and where I have let's say access to this group of ours and some … opportunities. […] I mean, Zagreb is, when it comes to like places for LGBT people and, clubs and so on, I don't know where else in Croatia there have that, so based on that I chose a place to study.*

Another factor in choosing the study was the expected economic benefit of the future occupation to which the study leads, but it was mentioned significantly less than the previously given reasons.

Study success – prerequisites and obstacles to study success

Personal prerequisites and obstacles to studying

As important individual prerequisites for successful study, students from both the University of Rijeka and the University of Zagreb mentioned motivation (all participants), followed by diligence and perseverance. Among the more frequently mentioned preconditions are also the economic situation of the family, and the support of close and important people. Accordingly, the oft-mentioned aggravating study circumstances are a difficult financial situation and working while studying, which are more frequently mentioned in the interview at the University of Rijeka.

In addition to the general individual prerequisites for successful studying, students also mentioned those that arise from their belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. Almost all students explicitly said that belonging to the LGBTQ+ community is an aggravating factor to a successful study, most often due to psychological difficulties (depression, anxiety, stress, frustration):

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

Mia: *… it's difficult if, say, you're among people you don't know or if you want to join a new crowd and you don't know how tolerant they are, how much they're not because every time it's a risky situation when you always come into something and it's an additional stress psychologically and I mean and sometimes I just don't feel like it, and then let's say I don't see anyone for a month, then I'm depressed again because I don't have a social life 'cause I don't see anyone for a month, but then I have to work and I have to work for the faculty. If I want to have good results, it's like this and I'm halfway there now, I'm trying to get by as best as I can, I write an essay when I get the time, I submit it like it is, even though it's not the best, and then I'm never really happy with it. And mostly there's a lot of frustration in general from all sides, as far as I'm concerned, no.*

Nenad: *I think it definitely helps if, if a person isn't, isn't part of some underrepresented group or minority. Because like Tamara said, I know that for myself, for example the first year was extremely difficult for me because the situation in terms of my mental health and being part of the LGBT community was not good, but as things started to improve so did my grades literally for one whole, it would be like 3.5 to 4.5 and they're improving. So, let's say in my example I think that it's very important….*

In addition to these difficulties, the discussions also revealed problems related to the lack of understanding or family support:

Nataša: *Well, for me personally, the most important thing is to have the support of my parents because for the last month I've been in a situation where I have to think 'bout what will happen to me and my life in Zagreb when it comes to studying because of my parents' reaction to everything about me and the LGBT community. So I think that motivation is very much related to their reaction because when they no longer give you that support, I think that the motivation to learn is lost and you don't even have time to deal with that, those problems, how much more important are those other problems now. And I think it's important that, people need to understand that it's not our only obligation in, in life is college, as I know they say, but a lot of other things that are mentally important.*

Robert: *As for my family, I think that my father doesn't support me, although a lot of times lately it seems to me that he slips up and addresses me in the masculine gender although most of the time he insists on the dead name and the feminine gender. And whenever one of his friends down there thinks that I'm his son, he says, "No, no, not my son, my daughter", I'm like, "You can't do this to me, like."*

Homophobic environment was mentioned as an aggravating circumstance for a successful study in connection to belonging to the LGBTQ+ community:

Mia: *Well, like I'm… so in general the situation, the fact that I live in a conservative environment, that every time on the Internet I have to, I don't know, I want to like talk to friends on the Internet 'cause I don't have time to like meet them somewhere and then there're always, there're always some, especially if there are current topics, if that's what they're talking about, especially now with all the elections or those referendums, and the like, and then these homophobic, these people come out of the woodwork and then I'm like, there. I don't know, I'm not sure straight people understand how much it's, like a burst of hate and hatred, which can surround you on a daily basis and then, although, I mean I just say to myself like ignore it, these are strangers, these are the people we live with in society, with whom we're surrounded and that's really, psychological stress like that, just somehow all the time on the edge even if I, I don't know if we're even aware of it because we're in it constantly or not, but to me, it's just like, just this general like, this environment is quite, it's very difficult sometimes to take.*

Institutional prerequisites and obstacles to studying

When it comes to institutional preconditions and obstacles to successful studying, focus group participants mention the general organizational difficulties at the institutions, but also those that arise from their belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. Organizational difficulties are mainly related to the organization of teaching:

> **Nataša:** *At the second exam period, during the summer period after the first year, after I passed everything on time in that first year and everything accumulates during those periods because we don't have enough mid-terms at the faculty, that is we don't have enough courses to pass through mid-terms. I think it's a big problem at the faculty 'cause like people from the law go home as early as the beginning of June.*

> **Nina:** *Well I don't know, to me they're problems with the organization 'cause we have exercises at the XXXX, at XXXX, XXXX and at XXXX. So we're scattered everywhere and I can't really waste time on it, and even financially when you need to go to XXXX or XXXX, so it's like again, it eats the money up.*

Focus group participants also discussed institutional barriers related to belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. Some also relate to the organization of teaching, i.e. insufficient respect for the specificities and needs of LGBTQ+ students:

> **Helena:** *So, the PE department at the XXXX faculty is… Mostly there were some, there were a couple of LGBT students who did not feel comfortable changing in like men's or women's locker rooms and then, we tried to talk with the PE department to arrange for a unisex locker room where everyone would feel comfortable. Because, so those few students who came forward, they were avoiding PE classes because of it. However, we couldn't achieve anything 'cause the professors weren't for it...*

The atmosphere at a HEI was also mentioned as an institutional precondition or obstacle to a successful study. Besides a positive attitude and sensitivity to LGBTQ+ students, this also includes negative experiences related to a homophobic environment:

> **Helena:** *Personally, the only thing that would make it difficult for me, I mean, I study Croatian language, so it's Croatian language and literature where there are a lot of people who are really patriotic and […] study it because they love Croatia and stuff and you can guess, they are quite uh, homophobic and, and so, so I don't really have a lot of friends in my year, that is, in the study programme at all, and then you somehow lose the will to go to lectures ... And I don't feel like sitting alone in class for an hour and half so you don't go to class and then you lose two years.*

> **Natalija:** *... for example we had in, I mean somewhere like the language exercises or something, some… I think… Of course a movie like any other, but I know that there was also some gay man portrayed in that movie as some kind of person who, of course like a man with some thin moustache in something short and sequined, some short sequined clothes who is hitting on a man, who has nothing to do with it and they really, they really turned him into, I mean… Very. […] Yes. Negatively and insultingly portrayed and I just don't want to. I don't know how to explain it. I don't want to deal with, as much as Hungarian is interesting to me as a language and I have this like Stockholm syndrome with it, I don't know if I want to work with a language whose...*

It is obvious from the interviews that both universities have institutional forms of assistance for students, including LGBTQ+ students, for overcoming difficulties to a successful study, such as psychological counselling offices. In Zagreb, psychological assistance is organized at the faculty level, and in Rijeka at the level of the university. The faculty in Zagreb, whose students participated in the focus group, has not only a psychological counselling centre, but also an association for LGBTQ+ students. Most students expressed satisfaction with such forms of help and the work of these bodies:

> **Mia:** *We have this association and we have this psychological counselling where no one judges you if you say you're, if you say you're gay. […] But like, I think that, that it means a lot that there's somehow,*

at least some safe place to, you can go to. […] Yeah, this was the first place [psychological counselling] I called 'cause it was the closest and I think that they pretty much, practically literally saved my life because I was like, borderline suicidal in that, like during that, in that period and so.

Nenad: *Well I just went today [to psychological counselling]. I mean I've been to several of them, but really, they're all extremely discreet and approachable and don't force anything and really not to go on too much now, all the best like […]. I have nothing, nothing bad to say about them. […] Like, we can talk about everything, from my problems with sexuality and by that I mean everything, not just my orientation, everything 'bout the faculty, 'bout family, my mental health, really, anything that comes to mind I can talk to them about it.*

In addition to psychological counselling, students mentioned other ways in which their institutions help them overcome difficulties to successful studying, such as talking to heads of institutions (vice-deans, deans, rectors in Rijeka) and the Student Council:

Nina: *Well, we have a head of our study, I mean, just contact them and they'll deal with everything. I mean, usually if I have a problem, I'm like looking for someone to get me through to the vice dean or someone to talk to, but usually the professors solve everything. Like I say, I'm really lucky. Like, I have it really good, yes. You usually talk to them and they take over from there. At my faculty, no one had a problem with that.*

Tamara: *For us everything goes through the Student Union. At our school the students are the lowest rank and then when there's a bigger problem that they can't solve they go to the vice dean or the dean.*

Researcher: *And this works well?*

Tamara: *Yes.*

A small number of students also expressed dissatisfaction with the forms of assistance offered by their institution, especially when it comes to the problems they face as LGBTQ+ people. Distrust was cited as the reason:

Nataša: *I didn't go to the counselling centre at our faculty although I found out about it a few months ago and I would never even found out if I hadn't seen someone write on the toilet door (laughs) "Counselling centre, call us", but I didn't call because I didn't know anyone, I didn't hear any experience of what kind of person the psychotherapist is and what problems she can actually deal with and handle 'cause they can't really understand our problems at least not completely if they didn't go through it. So I called the Iskorak group, which deals specifically with LGBT issues.*

Neda: *… if I experience some form of violence and I go, let's say I go to the vice dean, she is probably drinking coffee with that professor who, who insulted me or something. And what, I complain to her, she finally tells him what I complained about, then he takes it out on me. Or I even go to the rector, she has a bunch of people who got here to where she is. She didn't get there on her own. Like she'd be willing to go up against this or that person who put her there, uh h uhu. I don't think so.*

Suggestions for what should be done at the institutional, as well as the system level are related to the problems and difficulties that students encounter during their studies. They are mostly connected to the need for more information on the possibilities of seeking help at the institution, and their greater visibility as members of the LGBTQ+ community:

Nataša: *I'd just like the students to know that this [psychological counselling] exists a little differently because it's not exactly an official way for me to find out from the toilet door, but it would be really good if, at least during the first class at the faculty that a person comes, gives a lecture for 5, 10 minutes to tell us what we can do and what problems we can talk to them about ... I really don't think most people even know we exist. I didn't know we existed [student LGBT association at the faculty].*

Since most initiatives for solving the problems of LGBTQ+ students come from the students themselves, a greater involvement of professors has been suggested, including their being open about being LGBTQ+:

> **Nataša:** *I mean, it'd be great if that, if others and professors who are in a higher position to get involved in this, and not just that we have to start it, and I think it would really affect the students to see some of the professors being openly gay.*

In addition to the existing ways of providing institutional assistance, there was a suggestion to form a "channel" for anonymized reporting of insults and problems faced by LGBTQ+ students:

> **Tamara:** *Maybe a channel for anonymous reports. Like we have these surveys about courses at the end of like semester that are anonymous, but there's no way to report directly to the vice dean anonymously about a problem. I say now in theory, that I don't know about some, some excess with a professor or something like that, I don't have, or that student, they don't have a choice but to go publicly, under their name, to a person who can help and start dealing with the problem in that way. There's no way to report, to bring the attention of a person with authority and the ability to do something in an anonymous way to try to resolve a situation without introducing the victim themselves in quotes into the situation if it's not necessary.*

Starting from personal experiences with their own institutions, the students suggested the establishment of psychological counselling centres and LGBTQ+ associations at all faculties. It was also mentioned that visibility and information about LGBTQ+ persons should be improved at the university level, in order to remove "this stigma of the mental, mental illness" and allow LGBTQ+ people to "feel free", as one of the focus group participants said. It was also mentioned that psychological counselling for LGBTQ+ people is needed at all levels of education, especially at the secondary level, and not only at the level of higher education:

> **Helena:** *Yes, so that on all levels of education there's some, that there's help available or a person to talk to, an educated person to talk to who they [students] know they can confide in and that this is well known, that it's very accessible.*

The conversation has shown that the focus group participants find support and communication with professors and other students to be very important. When it comes to the support of professors, most of the interlocutors from both universities have stated that the professors are friendly and supporting:

> **Tamara:** *Well, I really have to commend my faculty that they're really trying and if they suspect that someone has a problem with discrimination or just some everyday embarrassment related to LGBT or any other vulnerable group, they just, I mean they proactively say like "If you need help tell us, we can do this, this and that, if this, this and that happens, that's unacceptable." And they keep reminding us that we all need to be more tolerant in the first place. Open to differences.*

> **Nina:** *As far as my faculty goes, everyone is quite, not liberal but tolerant and they'll really accommodate you and they're not backward. An example was when we had exercises at the pool. I mean. We strictly had to wear a one-piece bathing suit for girls or tight shorts for boys. I said like, I went to the professor, explained the situation and she was cooperative and said "… I'll give you a plus for attendance, you just come and watch." So it's really that when you go to them, they're really cool.*

Some students think that there are LGBTQ+ people among the professors as well:

> **Mia:** *Well, I also didn't have much of a reason to come out to a professor, maybe if I was writing a seminar on an LGBT topic and maybe then I'd be in a situation, but I don't think my professors would have any problems with that. I think, I'm even pretty sure that I have a couple of professors who are LGBT themselves in both, in both departments, so to that extent, I don't think there'd be, I don't think there'd be any problems, and even when we did some content like that, I mean literary or film or something similar that touched on LGBT issues, it was all a fair discussion, there were no homophobic moments so I think that even if it happened there'd be no problem nothing special.*

> **Nataša:** *Well, I've also never had the need with professors to show them anything that I'm gay or, because simply our communication is not like that but it's more professional. If we have a relationship, I mean if we like each other as students and professors, that's fine, but it still doesn't go into this essence of someone's being let's say. Also, in the XXXX departments I'm sure that there're professors who are also part of the community and who, who support it a lot so I don't think there'd be any problems for them to know. Specifically in the XXXX department we had, at linguistic exercises, we had to watch a film twice and write 'bout it for homework that was exactly related to LGBT issues. And in the XXXX department, there are professors, I know there're professors who are LGBT and I think that in fact, a couple of times I thought it'd be, that it'd be good to talk to them one day, to tell them a few words just so they understand me, I don't know, when I can't write the homework for the day…*

In most cases, students from both universities said that they had the support and good communication with other students:

> **Luka:** *Well, I had a good team here. There were only thirty of us, I know there're hundreds at other faculties, but the thirty of us got on well. And we didn't really have contact with the other years, but we were ok. So after my transition as I made it between the first and the second year, I stood in front of them at the beginning of the second year and said what I did and they were ok, like. I said like if you want to vote for some other student representative then you vote, I won't be mad. And they were like, no you stay, I stayed. And then we continued to function as if nothing had happened.*

> **Tamara:** *Well I think that, my faculty is generally small and we're like a small, I don't know, pedagogical village (laughs), everyone knows each other and in general the whole faculty really nurtures these healthy interpersonal relationships and we emphasize them constantly and there's really camaraderie with the exams and everything and when it comes to sexual orientation or anything that's different, we talk about it, I don't know, no, there's no malicious condemnation, even if someone feels the need to be malicious about it, just like with the professors, there're too many other people who would judge them for it and, they wouldn't even attack them but would go and educate them in an engaged way (laughs) and then people are usually withdrawn and somehow forced to listen and be tolerant and learn in an indirect way.*

Examples of non-cooperation among students are very rarely cited. However, when they are mentioned, they are not connected to being part of the LGBTQ+ community, but to the general relations between students in certain departments.

Performance and study satisfaction

When it comes to study satisfaction, students expressed both satisfaction and dissatisfaction. "I am both very satisfied and very dissatisfied", said one focus group participant. The reasons for dissatisfaction are generally related to the organization of teaching and the work of professors: insufficient practical teaching and mid-terms, problems with class shifts, insufficient opportunities to express dissatisfaction freely, especially dissatisfaction with the work of professors. The reasons for dissatisfaction with the professors are related to the quality of their work: "And there are professors who really, I don't know how they got a job here, I, I really don't understand, except that they had a connection", says Nataša, or as Natalija puts it: "…professors expect perfection from us, and the example they give us is, like, in the negatives…"

There were not many examples of dissatisfaction with the study related to belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. Helena's experience points to the insufficient sensitivity of study programmes (curricula) to the diversity of gender identities and sexual orientations:

> **Helena:** *Um, I wanted to say that, specifically, at my study what I'm not satisfied with. So XXXX, has three compulsory courses that are Bible-related. So, the Bible and Croatian oral literature, Biblical intertext in*

teaching and I don't know, I don't remember what's the third, it's on the graduate level. And I mean, I have to sit there for the whole semester and literally listen to the interpretation of the Psalm and how it can be connected to today's literature, and I mean we all know what connotations this carries. And then again there'll be some comments, I don't know, husband and wife and marriage, this and that, so that's quite difficult and it really kills my motivation to graduate, to live.

Almost all students who participated in the interview plan to complete their studies, and only one student said that they will not be able to continue their studies for financial reasons. At both universities, the uncertainty regarding the completion of studies is equally rarely linked to belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. It is connected to the uncertainty of parental financial support caused by the non-acceptance of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and psychological problems caused by the homophobic reactions of the environment:

Tamara: *I think I'll finish it successfully. I think what contributes most to my finishing it or not finishing it is the financial situation… And the second in line would be mental health and here I'd touch on the LGBT situation because I know for myself that I'm the best I've ever been in my life mentally, I'm healthy, I'm stable, I'm great, but I know that, I don't know, for example, in my neighbourhood we have a gang of Nazis. They're stupid kids, but stupid kids when there's eight of them skinheads and they go around, they see a boy, he's skinny, he has long hair, "Let's beat him up, maybe he's gay", or they start provoking me, this and that, that they'll rape me, blah blah, it kinda ruins your mental health or if you have to pass by them and they threaten you, or if you God forbid do something, if they, if they find out that I'm queer or something. I think that would definitely have an effect.*

Several students are also planning to go on mobility. Planning mobility schemes abroad is not related to belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, but to the nature of the study, most often with the desire for an internship.

Life during studying

Although, like most students, they face financial and housing problems, almost all focus group participants have said that they are satisfied with their life during studies:

Neda: *For me, this is now the most beautiful time in my life since I left home.*

Except the usual reasons for satisfaction, such as greater freedom and independence, they often cite the openness and diversity of content offered to them as LGBTQ+ people by the new environment, the faculty and the city where they study:

Helena: *It's also the most important for me, I mean, there's a big difference in, let's say, I mean, I moved away from my parents and now I'm living with my roommate, roommates, and like I think it's fun, I became really independent and I'm very glad that, that I have one like. When I compare Zagreb and the place I'm from, that's like heaven and earth, so it has a lot more opportunities and… I mean, realistically I feel much more comfortable there than I would at home. Because if I walked around the city with my girlfriend and held hands, they might look at me funny, and back home, I'd really never like.*

Mia: *…especially LGBT people who come from such conservative environments, to come here so that they can, to see that there's a different way of life that, that they can have like a decent social life and I don't know I think that's also very important and that's it also a very big motivation for why they come to bigger cities… but yes, I think that's really a salvation. For most of us.*

An important aspect of life satisfaction for students is the support of family and loved ones. It is especially important for LGBTQ+ people because they often hide their sexual orientation and gender identity for fear of rejection and the emotional and financial problems it carries. The experience of students from both universities testifies to their caution in coming out, i.e. revealing their sexual orientation and gender identity to their immediate and extended family and friends. Although most respondents disclosed their

sexual orientation and gender identity to their families, their acceptance turned out to be a complex process accompanied by difficulties for both the respondents (exposure to insults, threats, etc.) and their family (shock, fear of how their environment would react…). Even in cases when they have the support of the family, it refers to the immediate family, while their sexual orientation and gender identity are hidden from the extended family:

> **Helena:** *As for family acceptance, so just my immediate family knows. So mom, dad, my brother, with mom knowing the whole truth, which is that I'm gay. Dad knows half the truth, he thinks I like both boys and girls and I only told him that because I know he's not ready to accept the whole truth so let's take it step by step. My brother doesn't care, my brother is great. But yes, the thing with dad, our relationship deteriorated a little after that, after he found out and, I don't know. I think he was like the main reason why I had difficulties with accepting that part of my identity. But ok, the situation is getting better. As for like extended family, there's no way they'll ever know so …*

> **Mia:** *...how should I deal with this [mother's reaction] at all? I don't know. Like we haven't talked about it for a while and like, my extended family certainly doesn't know, but like I said, this won't be sustainable in the long run because now all my cousins are married (laughs)… and then everyone was like, now it's your turn, I'd like to come out to them, because it's not a problem for me, I'd like them to know it, to be somehow closer, and even if, if they don't accept me, then at least I'll know where I stand, and not like this where I'm constantly afraid and on the edge and I don't know what to say or can I say or this or that, so I'm in some kind of purgatory for that matter at least until my mom comes around somehow or whatever… For now the situation's uncertain.*

Unlike family, almost all respondents stated that they were out to their friends and had their support. In terms of satisfaction with other aspects of life during the studies, the students we talked to have similar experiences as most heterosexual and cis-gender students. This primarily refers to financial difficulties and working while studying, which were mentioned more often by students from the University of Rijeka. There was also a difference in the respondents' statements about comparing their lives with the lives of students from other faculties. Students from Zagreb reported problems with the low reputation of social sciences and humanities compared to STEM faculties, and job insecurity after graduation. These differences are not related to being LGBTQ+ or to the quality of the faculty, but to the perception of social sciences in a part of the student population due to the nature of studies, which can be partly explained by the lower status of social sciences compared to STEM sciences in the society in general.

Conclusion and suggestions

The interviews with both focus groups indicate that LGBTQ+ students who participated in the interview face the same difficulties during their studies as other students. The most common are financial difficulties, working while studying, and housing difficulties. Among the difficulties at the faculties, the most often mentioned is the inadequate organization of teaching: insufficient mid-term exams and practical classes, class shifts and dislocation, etc.

However, it is evident from the conversation that the participants of both focus groups have also encountered a number of problems related to their belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. These are primarily psychological difficulties such as anxiety, depression, stress and frustration, largely due to fear and uncertainty of their acceptance by the surroundings: immediate and extended family, friends, and professors and colleagues during the studies. Most of them chose to study in Rijeka and Zagreb because they consider them more liberal and tolerant environments in which they feel more accepted and free, with a variety of contents and opportunities that allow them a more fulfilled social life as LGBTQ+ persons, and better motivation to study compared to the environments they come from.

Their satisfaction with and success in studying is significantly improved by the institutional support of faculties and universities, such as psychological counselling offices and LGBTQ+ associations at the

faculty level (Zagreb), or psychological counselling at the university (Rijeka), as well as the positive and supportive institutional atmosphere that is manifested in the provided support and respectful communication with professors and other students.

Although they see their faculties as places where they can express their sexual orientation and gender identity more freely, students from both focus groups also listed a number of institutional difficulties they have faced as LGBTQ+ during their studies. These relate in part to their poor visibility at the institution level and insufficient information about the opportunities for LGBTQ+ students to get help from the institutions. Part of the institutional difficulties represents the lack of organizational sensitivity for the specific needs of LGBTQ+ students, such as appropriate locker rooms for physical exercise. Problems also arise from the gender-stereotypical and homophobic study content that is present in certain courses, including insufficient sensitivity of study curricula for the diversity of gender identities and sexual orientations.

Besides institutional difficulties, students also face difficulties connected with the family acceptance of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Hiding their identity, constant vigilance and disrupted relationships lead to psychological difficulties of LGBTQ+ students and fears for their existential security, made worse by the fact that non-acceptance of their gender identities and sexual orientations can result in being disowned by the parents or denied financial assistance.

Students' suggestions for improving their position and the institutional conditions for studying mainly stem from the obstacles they have faced during their studies. In addition to the already mentioned improvement of their visibility at the level of institutions and better provision of information to LGBTQ+ students about the possibilities for seeking help, the interviewed students had the following suggestions: establish psychological counselling offices and LGBTQ+ associations at all faculties/universities, provide psychological counselling at all levels of education, not only at the level of higher education, and have a greater engagement of LGBTQ+ professors in ensuring the rights of LGBTQ+ students. The students' experience also points to the need to ensure that diversity-sensitive study curricula are developed and implemented, which further implies the training of teaching and administrative staff to address the problems of LGBTQ+ students. The difficulties faced by the interlocutors from both universities within their families and the environment in which they lived indicate that non-acceptance of LGBTQ+ people, homophobia and gender traditionalism are a broader social problem that requires systematic work and synergistic activities of educational institutions, competent state institutions, and LGBTQ+ associations and other relevant actors (the media) in developing and implementing policies for achieving the equality of LGBTQ+ people in education, including higher education.

5.2.4. Students from alternative care systems[14]

On study selection

Students who participated in the research study at faculties in the fields of natural, biomedical, technical, agro-biotechnical, and social sciences and humanities in Rijeka, Osijek, Zagreb and Varaždin. Most students have said that their choice of study was not related to the fact that they come from alternative care systems. As the main reason, they give their interest in the field of study, which in most cases emerged in high school:

> **Anita:** *I didn't think that I was a child from the alternative care, I didn't even think about it for a job, I just liked the faculty as a faculty. So XXXX and this is a continuation of my high school which was medical so I went in that direction. That's it.*

> **Darko:** *I finished civil engineering high school in XXXX, I wasn't really the best student, it's like, just something I was interested in, some, we can even call it a hobby for someone because it's too early to say that I'm interested, I don't know. I really liked it, uh, I told myself, I'm going to go to university, if I enrol it's going to be something I'm interested in…*

If the choice of studies has been linked to belonging to the group of students from alternative care systems, the importance of the financial aspect is mentioned:

> **Vesna:** *…I really didn't know what exactly I was interested in, and they advertised in a way that they were on TV, … and they even came to us once to the school I went to and they mentioned scholarships that are given and then I looked it up a little on the internet, what kind of scholarships they give and how to get them, and I saw under one I don't know, one category that they also give it to people who grew up without parents and I said: "Wow, I could do that."*

Although belonging to a group of students from the alternative care in most cases did not influence the choice of studies, it appears as an important motivating factor for the overall decision to attend university. In this connection, they highlighted the importance of higher education for having a good family life:

> **Damir:** *Well, since I knew that one day I'd have to leave this care, that I had no foundation, that I couldn't rely on help from my parents, one day when I finished high school that I'll have to for myself and my future family one day achieve some conditions that I unfortunately never had, so I was somehow pushed by that already, by such thinking, I don't know, since the sixth grade of primary school. So since then I've kinda had this desire to enrol, to finish university…*

Study success – prerequisites and obstacles to study success

Personal prerequisites and obstacles to studying

When it comes to personal prerequisites for successful studying, the students emphasize individual characteristics such as perseverance, having a routine, or being motivated. They say that the study brings with it many successes, but also failures, and that it is therefore important to set yourself a final goal to aspire to and, at the same time, believe in yourself:

> **Hrvoje:** *So the qualities as a person should be diligent, persistent, believe in yourself and never give up even in the most difficult moments.*

[14] Students can apply for state scholarships for students from the alternative care or without both parents, and are awarded additional points for other scholarships. On the same basis, they have the right to accommodation in a dormitory. According to the data of the Ministry of Science and Education, in the academic year 2019/2020 a total of 85 students from the alternative care or without both parents received a state scholarship.

Damir: *It's very good to have a specific goal and, and like encourage yourself through these, I mean, to achieve the final, specific goal…*

Stjepan: *Well, if a [person] sets that goal and strives towards it, that he doesn't try to give up 'cause, if you give up then everything goes to waste that was done before.*

Students also said that during their studies they have encountered specific factors that could make it difficult to study. These factors can be roughly divided into material and socio-emotional barriers to successful studying. In terms of material factors, they mention insufficient material security, which essentially depends on the status of full-time students, i.e. on whether they will be able to enrol in the next academic year within the deadline. Students point out that, if they fail to do so and "lose a year", they outright lose all material rights that come with the status of students from the alternative care, which includes the right to a scholarship and accommodation in a dormitory:

Hrvoje: *Well specifically scholarships, financial aid, that's what we all know is the most important thing. You, if you fail at the faculty, then you're at the beginning …*

Anita: *… I just think that it's the only obstacle … if it happens that we lose our rights, we automatically lose all help. In essence, you automatically have to drop out of college.*

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

Students have said that this results in a state of permanent uncertainty, as they are essentially denied a "second chance" by the current system:

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

Anita: *And everything, you lose the right to all scholarships. And now the only problem is like, that you, for example in September, you lose all your rights in September. You lose the scholarship, you lose everything. And you're, I don't know. You've practically nothing left. You've invested so many years and you've got nothing. […] It's like a pressure where, like, I mean, an obstacle.*

In addition to the general issue of losing the rights of full-time students, the unfavourable financial position of part-time students from the alternative care was also mentioned. It was pointed out that this category of students is not entitled to a dormitory accommodation, which significantly increases their monthly accommodation expenses. That is why the scholarships, which they are entitled to as students from the alternative care, generally do not cover their monthly cost of living:

Stjepan: *…part-time students, I think they should… be provided with at least accommodation in a student dorm 'cause if part-time students from the alternative care have to live on a scholarship from the state it won't work. […] …'cause you must pay for that food and that apartment.*

Regarding the right to dormitory accommodation, the interviewed students also emphasise the importance of having the right to stay in the dormitory throughout the year, i.e. during the winter and summer breaks when HEIs have no regular activities. Otherwise, students may find themselves in a situation where they do not have secured accommodation. Even though, in this particular case, this right has been exercised, it is important to note that it is not implied:

Darko: *In this exact situation, I don't have to leave the dorm because I know this guy, XXXX, he also represents the rights of us who don't have adequate parental care, where he succeeded in having, someone like me, having the right to stay in the dorm, during the summer… when there's no studying, no classes. And if it weren't for that, I'd have to wonder where I'm supposed to go. I don't have parents, I left the home…*

When it comes to socio-emotional factors that can make it difficult to study, students single out a distrust of the social environment, problematic family relations, misunderstanding and lack of support from loved ones, and potential psychological problems. Some students mention problems in adapting to the social environment at the faculty, which they associate with the specific socialization of children from the alternative care:

> **Stjepan:** *…most of them are afraid to communicate with, they're very closed off and withdrawn because they've created these walls around them and now those walls need to be torn down somehow to get into some kind of a normal life. That they can communicate with other people. This is I think the most difficult circumstance, this socialization, because they've lived within some frameworks that are known to themselves their whole life, and then something new comes along that's totally unknown to them, and I think that's the biggest problem.*

> **Vesna:** *I mean it was quite difficult and I don't know what, I'm not used to such an environment, it was quite, quite a bit like, complicated in the first year, but I don't know, I've thought a hundred times that it wasn't the faculty for me because everyone's really rich, uh, around me… […] …that's been really hard for me. Among those people, anyway.*

Some students from the alternative care have the impression that they are stigmatized by other students:

> **Hrvoje:** *For example, they'll never call me for drinks or coffee because they think I don't have it, you know, or they think you're just not equal to them in something. […] …when you need help from the class they won't give it to you and they won't give you any feedback just because you're from there.*

In the sense of an emotional burden that can negatively affect the fulfilment of study obligations, students also cite complex family relations. Although they have largely grown up within the alternative care system, students still often think about relationships within their families:

> **Anita:** *Well I've always said that I'm going to two universities. One is life, and one is my actual study. Why is this? Because I come from a family that's, like, high-risk, and there's always something, some explosion always happens, I mean there's never peace. […] And I think it's like, it affects your studies a lot, your grades, that maybe you want to dedicate yourself even further and more, and you can't because it pulls you back…*

> **Damir:** *… we also think about it and if the situation at home is unfavourable, even though we don't grow up and we're not there physically… […] …it can still pull you to be partly preoccupied with these things, and you should be puttin' a lot of concentration and time and everything in the faculty to be able to finish it.*

Disrupted family relations and growing up outside the family lead to the feeling of missing the necessary social and emotional support from close people. Students have said that this lack of support can affect their ability to cope with their studies, as well as weaken their motivation to study. They also mention that they often have no one to advise them in making important educational and life decisions, which is why they need help and support:

> **Hrvoje:** *So, …there is no [family] "foundation", so we as students are alone in everything. […] The most important thing is that you have some kind of "foundation", some person behind you to give you, at least some things, like private lessons, something you need, to help you find, to advise you and so on. So let's say advice, for example, I'm in a period of my life where I don't know if I'll be able to finish the third year at all, and I know that I can and now in the sense of let's say now that there's a person who can advise me what to do, what to deal with first, what to… Some hint, how can I say it… To open the way for me again, to just go back to my own, to my own let's say "me" again, to know that I can do this and everything else.*

> **Darko:** *I mean here, now here's the, I don't know, the problem of where I am, I don't know where, day by day I wonder where, what, how tomorrow, you understand, this, something I'm struggling with. Here I think, [there's] some need for help…*

> **Hrvoje:** *So simply, [that there is] a person who is familiar with all things to say, that they can say: "Well, you made a mistake here, it will be like this and now don't do it again." And we as independent people, simply, when we make [a mistake] to us it's too big a problem and we only have that problem in our head. Let's say now I'm waiting for it to pass as soon as possible and I'm not thinking about anything else. It's in my head right now, and instead of focusing on some other things. So if there was that person, they'd tell me: "Take care of the faculty, solve the faculty, this will fall into place, it'll be like it is."*

As a factor that can make it difficult for them to study, students also mention "falling into depression", which they associate with feelings of disappointment and rejection:

> **Stjepan:** *Well, it's disappointment from an early age. When, simply, someone does not accept you and then you live in that system, all the time with the thought that you are rejected, and practically you're and you're not, like because while you're in the system people take care of you and then you carry it with you and then it can be a little limiting… […] So during your studies [you can] sometimes fall into some depression and then you don't have the will to, to study at all. I mean I go to lectures, but sometimes there's no will to study or anything…*

Institutional prerequisites and obstacles to studying

When it comes to institutional barriers to studying, students mention certain organizational shortcomings at HEIs, such as overcrowded schedules, insufficient material equipment or dislocation of some parts of the faculty, which do not affect only the students from the alternative care, but also the wider student population. When organizational deficiencies relate to unsatisfactory institutional communication with students, alternative care students may suffer significant consequences:

> **Vesna:** *…when we were thinking about which faculty to choose we got in touch with them and they said that I was getting tuition for the whole faculty, in the end it turned out that it was only four years, not the fifth, and that I had to pay for the fifth myself, and it's much more expensive than one of these. So yes, it was that lack of communication, I was already at the faculty at the third year when I found out that the fifth was not paid, that I could only finish the undergraduate…*

The already mentioned situation where their right to a scholarship and accommodation in a student dormitory depends on the status of full-time students was also linked to the institutional aspect. The interviewed students stress that, if they "lose a year", the HEIs do not take into account the possible difficulties arising from their specific social position:

> **Anita:** *And no one actually asks you about the background of the story, how it came to be that you lost your rights. […] …if someone has a background, it should be, to look at it a little more and not to have that, let's say brutal system. You have, you don't and that's it. […] …I don't think we should be privileged, but just that if you fail a year, you are lumped together with those who maybe don't work and like, and nobody asks about the background…*

Students also state that they are deprived of certain opportunities that the HEIs offer for maintaining the status of full-time students due to their position, as these opportunities require additional funding:

> **Damir:** *…according to… Ordinance on studying there's a certain number of points that can be transferred. If more is transferred, how many points depends on the faculty, depends on the study programme there's a certain, certain figure that's paid for each point. […] Whoever studied, knows that it's not easy and will not always succeed in passing everything, so for someone who's grown up in such form of care, if he happens to transfer several courses that cross that threshold that according to the Ordinance on Studying can be transferred for free, he has some 4, 5, 6 thousand Kuna to pay which is difficult for someone in that system of care.*

With regard to institutional assistance for study barriers, students say that such assistance often depends on individual initiatives at the faculty or system level, meaning that it is not the result of systematic

measures that would address the problems of students from the alternative care. They have pointed out that there are very few alternative care students at higher education institutions, which is why their difficulties are not visible to professors and other higher education staff:

> **Damir:** *…if I came with some such problem, something that bothers me, and to even mention that I'm a child from such type of care, I think they'd probably say that it's the first time they're encountering something like that so… I don't know if I can find someone at the faculty who I can talk to at that level about something like that and possibly solve some problems.*

> **Hrvoje:** *So the thing with the professors… […] I wouldn't get into it with them or say anything, but simply, it's best to be a student in a professional way and that's it.*

Regarding the above mentioned personal and institutional barriers to studying, students have made some suggestions for how to help students from the alternative care. They emphasize the need for various forms of assistance, which include the possibility of talking to professionals within the HEIs:

> **Stjepan:** *…a conversation, just to talk to someone with a little more expertise in this field because just with students, they don't know my background nor do I announce it around that I am from the alternative care, it's my thing, but just to have a chat with an expert. […] Yeah, just to really open up and talk to someone, to get something of your chest that you can't tell the students nor do I talk about it. […] And that's why I think that it should be organized at least once in two months to offer students from the alternative care some kind of a conversation.*

However, most of the proposals for forms of assistance that would help students from the alternative care are focused on problems connected with their material status. The students have emphasised that it is necessary to reduce the risk of interrupting the studies on account of the possible loss of fulltime student status. They have also warned of the need to provide certain material support after the graduation, or until they find the first job:

> **Anita:** *…so that we have, if it happens that we lose our rights to a scholarship because it's less pressure and then you don't have to think all the time what'd happen if I lost my rights, and maybe to organise some kind of a transition system for when we finish the studies… […] Well let's say we finish the study and now we have this transition of at least a month, two, three where just like any normal person we're waiting to enter the labour market. How are we gonna survive these two, three months, four, or whatever it takes, so this transition period that we can have it.*

> **Damir:** *… because when we graduate, all scholarships stop, so already next month you, if you haven't saved up, you don't know how and what you'll live on.*

> **Anita:** *I don't have a family background that I can say like my colleagues: "Well we have no work now, we'll go back to our families and wait until we find a job." I can't wait for that. There's no waiting for me. That's the biggest problem.*

Some students go a step further and suggest that state institutions should find the first jobs for students from the alternative care system who have completed their studies. This attitude can be interpreted as a form of positive discrimination, explained by the fact that students from alternative care who graduate from HEIs are extremely hard-working individuals:

> **Hrvoje:** *So, in my opinion, it should be that the state automatically gives us a job immediately. So, without thinking just get us a job right away. So that I don't have to look for it. […] …there aren't many children from the alternative care who graduate from university. Simply put, if such a child finishes university, I mean three years, five years, even a PhD, why, I'm thinking why does he now have to apply for some advertisements and look for a job? I mean that guy as a person, he's quality, so there's no discussion here, there's no dilemma…*

In addition to the previously mentioned need to provide part-time students from the alternative care the right to dorm accommodation, it has been pointed out that, due to poorer secondary school grades, students from the alternative care are often forced to enrol in part-time studies. It has therefore been stressed that the systematic empowerment of students from the alternative care should already begin in high school, and include empowerment related to academic achievement, but also to the socialization and preparation for life after/outside of the home:

> **Stjepan:** *…judging by those grades from high school, how motivated were they really while living in alternative care, to move towards some greater goal… […] And then that's immediately reflected on all those grades they get, so if the grades aren't good enough they'll enrol [the study] most often as part-time, if they enrol it regularly, great. […] …I think that, even at the high school level they should work with those children, prepared them somehow for the university through some workshops, like socialization is most important to them there, that it's provided, in those communities or homes, depending on where they are, to work with them and talk…*
>
> **Vesna:** *I wish that, that I'd been better informed about, this life when I was done with the orphanage, I was literally just thrown out and make it work. I don't know, really.*

By and large, the students have reported good communication with their professors, which mostly revolves around everyday interests and needs common to all students. In communication with professors, they generally do not bring up their position as students from the alternative care:

> **Anita:** *Like I've said, I've rarely talked about myself and my social/economic problems at the faculty. If I had to talk about it with someone at the faculty, I believe it would've been with the people I became close to while studying such as my colleagues, but I would rarely open up to professors like that, though I believe I can come to them as well (only I didn't feel so connected with any of the professors). When it comes to help with study obligations, some additional questions or even finding a job, our faculty offers a handful of options for solving such problems, so I could turn to professors, professionals who work there etc.*

On the contrary, one gets the impression that students hide the fact that they are from the alternative care system in communication with their professors:

> **Damir:** *…I was advised to try to explain to the professor that if I failed, that I could, what kind of consequences I might have with like, the rest of my life and funding and similar which, I don't know, I personally didn't want to use that…*
>
> **Hrvoje:** *But all in all, in my opinion, at my faculty the best thing is to be your own self and try to pass as you are. So just don't reveal yourself and that's it.*

When it comes to relationships with other students, most students have said that they have good relationships with their colleagues, and that they can count on mutual support when they need it. But at the same time, the students have said that their colleagues are often unaware that they come from the alternative care system, which can point to a certain unease on the part of students from the alternative care system regarding their status:

> **Vesna:** *Well no because I didn't talk about myself in that way. I never really talked to them honestly about my problem. So I'm like having coffee with them and hearing about how this one went to Paris, I don't know what, she bought something, and I'm like. I mean, I realized right away in the first week that they're not, that they're not interested in me, that they're too materialistic for me to talk about myself and to open up.*
>
> **Damir:** *Most of them didn't even know, until maybe two months ago, that I'd grown up like that …*

Performance and study satisfaction

Students have generally stated that they are satisfied with their studies, and they have also positively assessed their choice of studies and the achieved results:

> **Stjepan:** *Well I'm satisfied because I'm enrolled in my first choice. At the faculty… Well I like to work with people, it fulfils me, when I can make someone happy, like how the people from the SOS made me happy, so even if it's with someone, that I kinda repay a stranger 'cause I was a stranger to them and now we've become friends and kinda like a small family.*

> **Hrvoje:** *… all in all I'm happy with my faculty and the fact that I enrolled and I don't regret any of the, I mean I just found myself in it and I never thought that I should really enrol somewhere else.*

> **Anita:** *So I've enjoyed studying from day one… […] Now when I look back at some things how I even passed some courses and how I pushed through some crises that were going on at the faculty, it's just it. A miracle.*

In line with their satisfaction with the study so far, most students expect to finish their studies successfully. The concerns expressed by the students relate primarily to the possibility of finding employment after graduation:

> **Stjepan:** *And I think that, I'll finish my studies because that's first of all my wish and a goal I'm striving to.*

> **Hrvoje:** *… so I'm gonna have a diploma in my hands, no matter what. […] Because I haven't invested so many years to stop now.*

> **Vesna:** *So yeah, yes, of course I'm scared about what's coming, about work and everything else.*

What doubts were expressed about the successful completion of studies were connected with family problems, as well as with a vague picture of the future in which there were no clear goals and where future plans were not even considered. It is also noticeable that this lack of perspective and family support can affect the loss of motivation to study:

> **Anita:** *… and then your thought is divided on the other side [family], it's very hard and you have a feeling that you'll like fall apart…*

> **Darko:** *Well I honestly have no idea, I mean, the plan, the only thing I know is that whatever you plan that it won't come true, I don't know. I think it's best not to have any of those, huge goals or whatnot because tomorrow may not be what you expected.*

> **Darko:** *…I can't blame anyone but myself. Because I lost that will, motivation, I don't know, just because of some fear, too many questions about the how what where, what's waiting for me, I have no idea, you understand. […] You're on thin ice.*

When asked if they plan to go on mobility abroad during their studies, students usually answer negatively. Some students explain this attitude by subjective reasons, i.e. they believe that they as persons do not fit into this type of studying:

> **Hrvoje:** *… I don't think I'm really up for such things because I'm not, as a person I'm not very good for such things, I mean, I don't know, it'd be weird, I don't know …*

> **Darko:** *… it's something that's obviously not for me or I don't know. I mean even personally, it's not something I'd prefer to go here and there.*

The reasons for not planning international mobility are insufficient material resources, but also those practical reasons, such as the cancellation and repeated search for accommodation after a study stay abroad:

> **Damir:** *So if I was in a situation where I'd go to Erasmus, I don't know for how long that'd be, for one semester I think you go, or whatever, so I'd have to either because I was in the apartment here, I would*

either have to pay for an apartment where nobody's living or I cancel the apartment and then a month before I come back make all these calls and stuff 'cause otherwise I wouldn't have a place to be.

Vesna: *… yes it's actually, they were ultra expensive. I really wanted to go on exchange, but these are, these are, these, it's really very expensive. I didn't have money for it. And I'm so sorry I didn't.*

Life during studying

Expressing satisfaction with the studies, students think that the very fact that they managed to enrol in higher education and did not give up the study is a significant achievement, and they also emphasize the element of upward social mobility:

Hrvoje: *Well I like that, the fact that I enrolled [the HEI] at all. I never really saw myself in college. […] … no one in my family went to college, they finished high school so for me just enrolling in college and the fact that I'm going is a big plus in my life…*

Damir: *…there were situations, I'd say especially in the last few years since I've been studying, where I looked at everything, like where I came from, how far I've come… […] …the whole thing where I' moving toward what I'd aspired ever since elementary school, I've been fulfilling my wish so I'm happy, satisfied…*

Students therefore associate the satisfaction with their achievements with overcoming various difficulties they have encountered as children from the alternative care system. At the same time, one gets the impression that study success contributes to their positive self-perception:

Anita: *…I think it's a miracle what I've done at the faculty and considering everything so I'm very happy with everything.*

Vesna: *Honestly, like, [I'm the happiest with the fact] that in my first year, like I didn't hit rock bottom… I really fell into depression, and that I pulled out from it in the way that I moved, moved the location to, every season I went to work at the seaside. I'd run away from Zagreb, I didn't go back, I don't know, back home and I don't know, crying about how bad it was, but I went to work, I'd forget where I lived, I'd come back. In my fourth year, I got a job at a company. I worked there three times a week because I only had classes twice a week, I kind of fenced myself in there, forgot where I was going to the faculty or when I showed up at the faculty I didn't care anymore. I literally surpassed myself and all that and I just built myself up, I would say that. Um, I managed to get out of what I thought I wouldn't.*

When it comes to close people who give them support in relation to their studies, students emphasize the role of friends, close family members, as well as educators from the communities in which they lived before the studies. They also mentioned that the support of family members or educators can sometimes be questionable due to their insufficient knowledge of the higher education context or distance from the place of study:

Stjepan: *[I have] from friends also an emotional support and just to talk…*

Anita: *… the head of XXXX, he's my biggest support in all this. And my friends and… my sister who says my life is science fiction and wonders how I manage it all …*

Hrvoje: *… like I have a sister who I can talk to about everything, but she doesn't understand 'cause she didn't… go to college… […] So yeah, now I don't really have anyone to talk to 'bout the faculty, I mean really talk and everything.*

Vesna: *… it wasn't much of a support. And when I say that, I mean, they [educators] were in Osijek, I was here so that's not it. There's no one to talk to and open up.*

Most students have been living in a dormitory during their studies. They are satisfied with such accommodation and consider it adequate for their needs during their studies:

Darko: *… I mean the dorm is like top notch, I can't complain, I was in a couple of dorms, this is really great. […] …I mean, we have everything.*

Anita: *In the dorm I have a room to myself. […] I really have no excuse on that issue that something's not right…*

Some students live with a partner or a family member, and mention some limitations that may negatively affect their studies:

Hrvoje: *… I don't have a room, I don't have my own room. […] …me and grandma… we have 25 square meters… […] I study more at work than at home.*

With the exception of one part-time student, all interviewed students receive one or two scholarships which enable them to cover living expenses and study costs. These are mostly local scholarships, while a smaller number of students get state scholarships. The impression is that the students spend scholarship funds rationally, and some of them, if their study obligations allow it, try to supplement their income by working through the Student Service:

Hrvoje: *Yes, I manage [to keep up with the demands of the student life financially]. I mean, considering I had to help my sister, yes, in every sense. I've quite enough money for myself and I honestly don't need anymore. […] I get a scholarship and now I'm working, but like yes, just the scholarship itself is quite ok, like solid.*

Darko: *So I think first, I'm thankful to God to have a scholarship at all. And secondly, I'm grateful that they are as big as they are… […] So I don't know, I can't complain at all '…*

Anita: *I manage to cover everything financially and the student restaurant and pay 550 for the room and there's still some left.*

In line with the positive assessments of the scholarships they receive, students are satisfied with the scholarship opportunities, i.e. the fact that there are various public and private scholarships for which they can apply as students from the alternative care. However, despite the impression of a diverse "offering" of scholarships, students stress that there is often insufficient information about the existing scholarship opportunities and other forms of financial support:

Hrvoje: *… so there are a lot of scholarships and competitions very much, yes.*

Stjepan: *…these scholarships are offered from various such sources and are available, now it depends on how much someone will promote that this scholarship is possible… in case the student does not receive this information, he will not even receive this scholarship…*

Hrvoje: *… so I could've applied for that scholarship… […] I didn't know, I lost the one-off payment of 10,000 Kuna.*

Damir: *… and then I thought that if I already got the family pension that I didn't have the right, and it turns out that all the previous years I could've also been receiving as part of the family pension [state scholarship]…*

When asked what their student life looks like compared to other students, they estimate that there are no big differences, or rather that the existing differences mainly depend on personal interests and preferences:

Anita: *…so I'm at the same level as all the other students at my faculty. In terms of everything. […] Everything is available to me, from equipment, from literature, professors, nothing so, the only thing, this situation is a bit tricky, but ok.*

Darko: *… there is nothing to it, it's equal. It's the same, he has lectures when I have lectures, now what he does next, it's his free time, I don't know.*

Hrvoje: *…well the free time is like, it depends on how everyone arranges things for themselves…*

But although they feel that in terms of student life they are not deprived in relation to other students, the students we spoke to have pointed to some peculiarities of the lives of students from the alternative care:

Damir: *Just to summarize… we'll probably do more, especially since we mostly live alone, so we have to set aside some time for some responsibilities and take care of those things that someone who, if they're studying in the place of residence, don't have to worry about because their parents will take some part of it on themselves, from I don't know, cooking, washing, cleaning just these everyday responsibilities, to taking care of finances, household and [life] in general.*

Conclusion and suggestions

The difficulties encountered during their studies by students from the alternative care system largely stem from their belonging to a vulnerable group. These difficulties can basically be connected to material and socio-emotional barriers to higher education.

The students especially emphasize the fact that their right to scholarships and dormitory accommodation depends on maintaining the status of full-time students, i.e. the obligation to enrol regularly year after year. If they fail to do so, they lose all material rights they exercise based on the status of alternative care students. Students warn that such normative framework results in a state of permanent uncertainty and causes a psychological burden that is present for the entire duration of study. With regard to material rights, the disadvantage of part-time students from the alternative care is also mentioned because, due to the fact that they do not have the right to student dormitories, scholarships often do not cover monthly living expenses.

When it comes to socio-emotional difficulties and obstacles they face in their studies, students cite the distrust of the social environment, problematic family relationships, misunderstanding and lack of support from their loved ones, and potential psychological problems. All of the above requires additional efforts on their part in order to successfully meet their regular study obligations. These difficulties can be especially pronounced at the beginning of studies when students move from the system of alternative care to a new academic and social environment that is often located outside the place where they lived before. This situation can make it difficult to communicate with educators from their old communities, as well as with friends or close family members. From the conversations with students it can be concluded that the lack of social and emotional support from close people manifests itself in different ways throughout the study, which can ultimately weaken the motivation to study and cause certain psychological difficulties.

In terms of barriers to studying, students also single out organizational shortcomings at HEIs that are common to all students, such as a crowded schedule of study obligations or insufficient material equipment at the faculties. Moreover, students point out that there are very few alternative care students at HEIs, which is why difficulties related to their status are generally out of the focus of teaching staff and other employees. Therefore, assistance at the institutional level is often the result of individual initiatives rather than systematic measures that address the problems of alternative care students.

Based on the presented difficulties and obstacles they have encountered during their studies, students have also made certain suggestions for helping and improving their position. Given the problem of insufficient social and emotional support, there is a need to systematize this form of support, for example through the work of the office for psychological counselling at universities/faculties and other HEIs. The possibility of periodically (e.g. once every two months) organized discussions of students with professional staff at universities or faculties is also mentioned. Regarding the proposals for improving the material status of students, the need to reduce the risk of study interruption caused by the loss of student rights is

particularly emphasized. This means that the right to scholarships and dormitory accommodation should not depend on the status of full-time students, but should allow students to retain their student rights even if they "lose" a year. Such a measure would significantly alleviate the psychological pressure that students feel due to latent uncertainty and the risk of interrupting their studies. Regarding the issue of accommodation, they also highlight the necessity of allowing students to stay in the dormitories during winter and summer breaks when there are no regular activities at HEIs, because students often do not have alternative accommodation. Furthermore, it is proposed that students be provided with financial support even after graduation until they find their first job, because in that period, students from the alternative care generally cannot count on financial support from their families. Complementary to this proposal, the obligation to provide the first employment by state institutions is also mentioned. It has further been said that, due to the relatively poor success in secondary school, students may be forced to enrol in part-time studies. In this regard, the suggestions are to give part-time students the right to dormitory accommodation on one hand, and on the other to provide students from the alternative care with additional academic support during high school education in order to increase their chances of an undisturbed transition to (regular) higher education.

The findings on the barriers and challenges faced by the students who participated in the research are in line with the findings of the 2014 Alternative Care Students Survey (Franz et al., 2017; Urbanc et al., 2018), which also correspond to the above mentioned suggestions for strengthening the position of students from this vulnerable group.

5.2.5. Female students in the technical field

On study selection

The female students included in the research take degrees at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering and Naval Architecture, the Faculty of Transport and Traffic Sciences, the Zagreb University of Applied Sciences, the Faculty of Maritime Studies and the Faculty of Engineering in Rijeka and Zagreb. As the main reason for choosing technical studies, female students from our study most often stress their intrinsic interest in a certain discipline or field of study (e.g. interest in mathematics or physics). They also cite other non-gender specific reasons such as inability to enrol in the first-choice study, poor State Matura results, similarity of the secondary school programme they completed and the chosen field of study, employment opportunities after graduation, financial status and proximity to the HEI. It is particularly relevant from a gender perspective that they often mention their father's occupation as the key reason for enrolling in technical studies:

> **Ivanka:** *Basically, I shortlisted Civil Engineering and Engineering. And then I asked around among my age group, that is, some people who were already studying and in the end I chose Engineering because I liked it the most out of everything because I saw a lot of connections with, actually my father's profession. As a kid, I used to play with him in the workshop and I already knew a lot, and I didn't actually study it.*
>
> **Researcher:** *What does your father do?*
>
> **Ivanka:** *Mechanic, car mechanic. He'd explain how the engine works, I knew that when I was 10, but in a much simpler way, without any expert terms and then that's where the love for mathematics and all that came from.*
>
> **Vanja:** *Like the previous two girls, I had a similar situation that my father graduated from a technical college, as an electrician and worked on a ship and then throughout my childhood and my life so far, through upbringing I got some of his characteristics of work, that life on a ship which he told me about. My life was not like normal children where someone would tell me: "You can't touch it, it's so and so", my dad had an explanation: "No, it's directly short-circuited, don't touch it." (Laughs) […] From that, throughout my life… and now when I have to work and study for the faculty, he shows me engines, then we sit in the evening together, we study.*

Female students mostly feel that being a woman did not have an effect on their decision which study to choose:

> **Silvija:** *Well, the main reason for enrolling was that I was interested and that I found the study programme and the specialisation I was interested in on the faculty website, and the fact that it was a predominantly male faculty did not influence that decision because I found what I wanted to enrol independently of who the others students were.*
>
> **Katica:** *… I wasn't thinking that it was a male college, I was thinking that it was a technical college and it's an area that interests me and that I'm really good at.*

However, some female students have reported that, during the study selection period, they received advice from close people who felt that technical studies were not suitable for girls:

> **Vanja:** *So, as much as he [the father], in quotes, helps me with that, he didn't want me to enrol there because he knew what this life on a ship that I wanted meant and then he said it's just not a place for me, for a woman. But I had the courage to go after what I wanted.*
>
> **Ivanka:** *Others were actually more like, "Well, there are only men there, what you're gonna to do with only men?" I said, well, I'll have lots of male friends and it'll be great because it's well known that men don't gossip so much.*

The students from our sample did not listen to such advice, but the question is how much pressure from the environment girls generally face when choosing the desired study programme, and how many give up their first choice of study for that reason.

Study success – prerequisites and obstacles to study success

Personal prerequisites and obstacles to studying

The students listed a variety of individual characteristics that can advance or hinder individuals in successful studying, such as diligence, perseverance, motivation, learning habits, organizational skills and time management, health, cognitive abilities, and prior knowledge. Also, female students consider that the support of the environment is important if a person works while studying and if they have to travel to the faculty. According to the students, family characteristics that can affect the success of studies are the financial situation, level of parents' education, family obligations, and parental emotional support and acceptance.

When asked whether their gender is an aggravating factor for a successful study at technical HEIs, female students have differing opinions. Some believe that girls and boys are equally (un)successful students and that individual disparities in success do not arise from gender differences:

> **Researcher:** *As a woman, do you find it harder to be successful than your colleagues… at your faculty?*
>
> **Silvija:** *Absolutely not.*
>
> **Ankica:** *Um, no, I've never thought that boys would do better or that boys would be more successful, I think everyone has their own abilities that they built through primary and secondary school and that they now brought to the faculty…*
>
> **Lidija:** *No, I wouldn't say there's a difference in abilities, full stop.*

On the other hand, some female students believe that there are certain aggravating factors that stem from their gender. During their studies, some female students have encountered the prejudice that women have no place in technical faculties. These prejudices can be manifested in communication with professors and/or male students, but also in the social environment in general, and their intensity can vary:

> **Katica:** *The only thing that was kinda problematic is colleagues who're making fun of us, teasing like what're we doing at a technical faculty like we're not capable enough for it, which started out as a joke but sometimes their jokes can be quite offensive.*
>
> **Ankica:** *…there are definitely prejudices and stigmas and stereotypes about our position at the faculty. I've personally faced some of them and for example professors who don't believe that I'm capable of passing a course which I've proved that I am.*
>
> **Martina:** *Well I have to admit that I had a situation happen to me that was a big shock, precisely on the topic of those male-female relations. …one older professor, these were the first laboratory exercises from the Basics of Electrical Engineering, so like the basis for everything else. Basically, he started questioning the students one by one on some basics, just to see. "Let's start from the beginning, colleagues, you go first." I was the only girl in the group and I was in the middle, so I don't know how was that the beginning. And nothing, I got up and started answering all his questions until I got confused and kinda lost. And then he asked all the other colleagues one question each, every time that one of them didn't know something "Colleague, do you know" – "I know." I get up and continue answering for another 10 minutes. And so when he went around the circle, he came back to me again and asked me to get up and said to me: "Colleague, I am a misogynist and just so you know that you won't slip through just because you're a woman."*

Furthermore, a smaller number of female students believe that there are certain "objective differences" between girls and boys in their experiences, prior knowledge or ways of cognitive functioning that can make it more difficult for girls to study technical studies:

> **Katica:** *…but that they're [male students] more capable, I wouldn't say they were more capable but they get some things faster. When I come to a course and he starts talking, I don't know, about materials, steel or what car parts are made from it, I'm just gawking, I've absolutely no idea about it, while there are colleagues who respond: "Yeah, that's used in a Porsche", "Yeah, that's in the truck", I'm like, "What?" I mean, I don't really know where they know all this from, maybe they, maybe it's like natural to them that they follow all that on the news and read newspapers about it or study it themselves, while for me it's more natural when someone shows it to me, then I do some research on it, I don't know, that's why quite often it's like why don't I know that, how do they know it, and I don't know.*

Other aggravating circumstances were sporadically mentioned in the interviews that might make it more difficult for women to study at certain technical faculties, in particular, their distrust of the social environment and the physical demands of their studies:

> **Vanja:** *PE's the same, it's hard… Our PE classes are really like, military, it's not just like we show up and then most just sit on the bench, and two people are doing the work. Everyone works there, no one sits on the bench. It's literally: hello, line up and the marines. Like, marines, 15 series, 20 series, pull-ups, no other girl could probably do that much, I'm an athlete so I do it. But for another girl, it might be a lot harder because she'd need to be in shape…*

Institutional prerequisites and obstacles to studying

The female students from technical faculties have noticed various obstacles that they have encountered during their studies. In addition to the previously mentioned prejudices on the part of the professors, these are mostly obstacles and problems that are not related to their belonging to an underrepresented gender group. Students thus talk about problems related to the study schedule, the administration, organization of studies and poor material equipment of the faculty. They also complain about too much emphasis on theoretical courses and content, and too little on practical teaching and the development of practical skills. They further mention some low-quality professors, as well as insufficient communication between the faculty bodies and students. Among the institutional barriers that affect female students, they cite the insufficient number of women's toilets at the faculties and their suitability:

> **Lidija:** *I don't know if this is a condition for studying exactly, but they don't have women's toilets on all floors, it's also an example of, but I think it's more to do with it being an institution with a small building than as an institution.*

> **Gabrijela:** *I know there's never toilet paper at the XXXX. I guess they expect girls to always have their tissues or something.*

At the system level, female students single out only those problems that are not related to belonging to a certain gender group: problems related to mobility (e.g. between different universities in Croatia or related to the transition from professional to university studies), insufficient communication between system-level bodies and students as well as between the Student Council and students, administrative problems and non-compliance with the prescribed rules (e.g. the possibility of studying full-time and working).

The students have reported that their faculties facilitate their studies through financial help (e.g. through scholarships, sponsorships by various companies, debt relief for tuition fees), but also through the accessibility and kindness of professors. Students who feel that they have not received help from the institution in overcoming study obstacles state that the professors have no understanding for absences caused by health problems and are dissatisfied with the work of the Student Council.

When asked what specific help they would need at the level of the institution (faculty), female students of technical faculties mostly mention things that are not closely related to the issue of gender. For example, they would like better/easier availability of information (e.g. about different student associations or activities at the faculty), better material equipment of the faculty (e.g. more devices for practical work and educational materials), more pronounced cooperation between faculties and the real sector (e.g. companies where students could do an internship/find employment), better cooperation between faculties and former students (who could advise current students), and the development of additional skills (e.g. communication and presentation skills). Also, some students think that it would be useful to organize trainings for professors with the aim of reducing gender stereotypes:

> **Researcher:** *Is there anything your institution could do to make the studies easier for you as women?*
>
> **Gabrijela:** *I don't know if I'd feel comfortable if someone did that, give me privilege specifically as a woman, it might even be offensive, but possibly some education for professors to discriminate less, but not necessarily discriminate, but this kind of brain, brain, female, male brain is a brain and the brain knows what it knows and that's it, something like that and, but personally for me, it doesn't necessarily have anything to do with this, the institution, the faculty, the course, with me being a woman, it's just that people are the way they are and those people who are already I don't know, about 50 is the average at the faculty for professors and they think what they think and now I don't know if there's anything that could change their view of it, so then I don't know how much can be done here.*
>
> **Ankica:** *I agree with my colleague Gabrijela, maybe some education, maybe the basics of etiquette in treating female colleagues in such a way that even if the professor still carries some of his stigmas, if he has prejudices or whatnot to keep them to himself because it's simply basic behaviour toward a human being that you don't insult them.*

Also, one conversation resulted in the idea of introducing disciplinary regulations that would define sanctions for professors who behave inappropriately:

> **Lidija:** *Without specifically formulating male-female communication problems, misconduct could still be prevented through disciplinary regulations, by ensuring that there's a formulation that ensures that no student can be belittled or be rude to, comment, it's difficult for me to formulate it now. There may be a wording in the disciplinary regulations that, no one necessarily has to refer to, I mean it's not necessary that there's a situation in which someone refers to it, but when a professor is hired, he, among other things, looks at the disciplinary regulations that he must follow. If the disciplinary regulations include a wording that he realizes he can't be rude, sexist or I don't know what else can happen, then he won't do it if he wants to keep his job. This is my opinion as an experience, I mean I look at it from my prism as the ombudswoman and a female person in the academic community.*

Most female students state that they have someone to turn to for help at their faculties if they have a problem (e.g. professors, student office staff, older students). However, while some female students praise the accessibility of professors and other faculty staff, others are not satisfied because they find it difficult to get relevant information due to uninformed, disorganized or unkind professors and faculty staff.

Some students are very positive about the communication with professors at their faculties and consider them to be friendly and approachable. Some female students estimate that some professors are even more accommodating to female students than to male students:

> **Ivanka:** *Well, I don't know. I, for example, much prefer to have some male professors because they sometimes offer much more knowledge to the female population, especially if they see that you understand and are trying more than necessary. Especially because they're glad that it's no longer just a male profession but that women also enrol and that they're equally successful and happy and satisfied with what they do.*

However, many female students have reported problems in the communication with individual professors, and these problems often stem from prejudices that some professors have toward female students:

> **Jasmina:** *I had only one negative experience and it was also at the faculty, at the faculty, in my first year. […] I needed a lot of points and I failed the first exam date, the second date I come, I write everything, some two pages, one question, two pages and I forget to write this one zero that is written in the second line, but in the first line I forgot it in this rush of doing math derivations. And I come to the professor and he tells me: "Zero points." I'm like zero points? And he says, "Oh yes, it's hard for women to understand some things, especially mechanics, that takes them a little longer." Then I went crazy, took the exam, threw it in the trash. Because he just struck a nerve. You can't tell me that, a man like that. If you're a professor emeritus at our faculty, I mean it's ugly to hear that from his mouth. […] But, that was the only example that I felt about gender, about being a woman.*
>
> **Katica:** *It happened to me in the first year that I came to an oral exam for one course in front of a commission, a colleague and I went inside and that the professor treated me a little arrogantly and chauvinistically because I was at that faculty and because I answered him. He asked me something about why I didn't study and then I explained the situation to him, then he kinda took it out on me while to the colleague he was like sure, colleague, I understand, it's clear. When I went out I felt like trash, like it was my fault for not passing it before and when I talked to other colleagues they told me it was known that the professor was a bit chauvinistic towards some female students and in the end I just gave up. If it's common knowledge why doesn't anyone do something about it.*

The students are generally satisfied with the support from their fellow students, and say that they socialize and help each other fulfil their student obligations. Still, some female students cite problems in the communication with their male colleagues that arise from the prejudices that male students have towards their colleagues or women in general:

> **Vanja:** *…it's a different mentality and the type of people who just have stereotypes that say, girls aren't here and they have no business here. That's not the case with me. Me, although I'm a girl, I'm one of the best in the generation in that programme, so they appreciate me, respect me, help me, but there are two other girls who aren't so keen. I also came from a general high school, so this was like a step back, not a step forward. But, like I've said, the other two girls didn't come with such a foundation, it's a little harder for them, they need a little more time to figure it out, more patience to be shown to them. And then of course the reaction of the boys is not very normal: "Come on, we will help you", but it's more like: "You're so stupid, how can you not know that." I help them because I understand both sides, I'm some kind of a bridge, I can handle it, but I'm really sorry to see them treated like that.*
>
> **Researcher:** *Do you feel used at the faculty because you're women? Do you prepare presentations, study materials?*
>
> **Štefica:** *Yes.*
>
> **Researcher:** *Is it like, they're nerds?*
>
> **Štefica:** *Yes.*
>
> **Katica:** *Well for some boring courses we do all that boring work and then they ask us because we're usually the first to take it and the first to learn and then they ask us how we studied for it, what were the questions, what was on the exam, but a lot of it during the years, I don't know, I created this character and this personality that I just say no, do it yourself.*
>
> **Gabrijela:** *I personally noticed more wrong attitudes on the part of the student in the sense that when a female assistant or a professor comes, then it's more like mhm, now we got a female assistant or professor, like they know less, so I felt more pressure from that side than from the faculty, and in that*

direction what can be done, I don't know, I think it's something that should be implanted in someone earlier, and in university I think it's a little too late to change such attitudes.

Performance and study satisfaction

Most female students are satisfied with their previous experience of studying at their faculties, and those who are not satisfied single out factors that are not related to their gender (such as the organization of studies and an overload of obligations). The students have stated that they are happy hanging out with fellow students and with the content of their studies. They are worried about financial problems, their estimation that they have insufficient (prior) knowledge necessary to master the requirements of the study, and the uncertainty related to employment after studies. Fewer concerns are related to gender issues, i.e. the fear that they are doing "worse" in their studies than male students, and that they will be offered fewer opportunities in their working careers than men:

Štefica: …*maybe it happened to me personally that I sometimes catch on less and more slowly than my male colleagues, somehow I've the impression that, they seem to know it better, I don't know where they got it from. I always when I have a new course I go from the beginning, there is no prior knowledge, I pretend that each course stands for itself…*

Lidija: *I worry about whether the perception of my path will affect my success in some business life, if I'm going to go to some bigger corporation or I don't know what. I just hope I don't miss some opportunities that might be offered to someone and not to me because of this minor difference because I'm a woman, the family, whatever. I just hope I'll get lucky there, if not it doesn't matter…*

Female students generally express the expectation that they will successfully complete their studies, or rather that they will enrol in the next level of education, although many have at some point considered giving up their studies totally or changing their field of study. One student gave up on electrical engineering because she realized that she was not interested in it, and enrolled in nautical studies. The reasons for considering dropping out of study were mainly related to the difficulty of the study and had nothing to do with the female gender. While some students think about the possibilities for mobility, and see going abroad as a possibly useful experience, others do not think about mobility because they want to finish their studies as soon as possible, or they fear that studying abroad would not be adequately rewarded with ECTS credits.

Life during studying

When asked to compare their life during studies with the lives of other students, female students from technical faculties generally estimate that they have less free time and more study-related obligations than students from other disciplines, irrespective of the gender. However, in these assessments, female students do not refer to their gender, but mostly compare themselves with students from the faculties of social sciences and humanities. None of their answers have indicated that their life during studies was worse or better than the lives of other students for reasons that could be related to their gender.

Conclusion and suggestions

On the basis of the conversations with female students from technical faculties, it can be concluded that their study experiences are largely similar to the experiences of all students of these studies. They mainly cite intrinsic motives for enrolling in technical studies, and say that their gender did not play a role in their choice of studies. The father's occupation is often mentioned as the key reason for choosing a technical study programme. However, some female students have reported that, during the study selection, they received advice from close people that technical studies were not suitable for girls. One might wonder

about the share of girls who encounter various types of pressure from the environment when choosing the desired field of study, and how many of them give up on the technical field as a result.

In answering the question of what are the prerequisites for a successful study, female students list various individual and family characteristics that are not related to gender. Some female students encounter prejudice that technical studies are a "male" field, which is mainly manifested through the communication with individual professors and/or fellow students. A small number of female students believe that there are differences between girls and boys in experiences, prior knowledge or ways of cognitive functioning that may make it more difficult for girls to study technical studies. Nevertheless, most female students are satisfied with their study experience as well as with the support of the majority of professors and colleagues, and believe that they will successfully complete their studies.

The students have noticed various institutional obstacles they have encountered during their studies, but these are mostly problems that are not related to their belonging to an underrepresented gender group (e.g. problems connected to the schedule of responsibilities at the faculty, administration, organization of studies, material equipment of the faculty, etc.). In addition to some professors' gender prejudices, the obstacles that affect female students include an insufficient number of women's toilets at the faculties and their suitability.

The female students have made certain suggestions that they believe could reduce gender discrimination at technical faculties. Some students believe that it would be useful to organize trainings for professors with the aim of reducing gender stereotypes. Such trainings could also encourage professors to be supportive to those female students who have a low level of self-efficacy compared to their male colleagues. It has further been proposed to introduce disciplinary regulations that would define sanctions for professors who behave inappropriately.

Given the pressure from people close to them (e.g. family members) that some girls face when choosing their studies, it can be concluded that earlier professional orientation during high school education could help girls persevere in their interests and enrol in the desired technical studies in greater numbers. Also useful would be trainings for primary and secondary school students and teachers with the aim of reducing gender stereotypes related to different occupations and areas of human activity. A media campaign about successful female engineers and scientists in the field of technical sciences could also have a positive effect on reducing gender stereotypes, strengthening the self-efficacy of girls related to the enrolment and studies at technical faculties as well as the gender balance of male and female students of technical studies.

5.2.6. Male students in the humanities[15]

On study selection

Students who participated in the research study at the faculties of teacher education or humanities and social sciences in Rijeka and Zagreb. As a reason for choosing studies in the humanities, students most often cite interest in the field of study. In addition to interests, a common reason for choosing the current study is the impossibility of enrolling in their first-choice study, which is generally also from the humanities. However, a few students have enrolled in the current study after experiences studying at faculties in other fields, and cited interest as one of the main reasons for changing faculties. Additionally, some students have mentioned aspirations towards working with young people and working within the educational system as reasons for choosing their studies.

None of the students cited belonging to an underrepresented group as the reason for choosing the current study, nor was it mentioned as a factor that could have influenced the choice of study. However, they have mentioned being aware that, as men, they would be in the minority at their chosen faculties and that the society has certain prejudices and stereotypes towards and about men in the humanities:

> **Goran:** *I think it's because he said the process of upbringing … is perceived more as a woman's motherly role and there are these stereotypes that men aren't empathetic enough and aren't as, as capable of being, of doing that job as women are and that women have more like natural predispositions than men.*

They said that this could be the reason why fewer men enrol in studies in the humanities, and pointed out that the very fact that they know in advance that they will be in the minority may deter them from enrolling. As another reason why fewer men enrol in these faculties, they mention the lower prestige associated with later employment, which also includes lower income:

> **Marko:** *Primarily due to the historical development of this profession, or rather the decline of the prestige of the profession. And because of the declining financial benefits that came from pursuing that profession. Given the patriarchal system in which the civilization developed, the man has always been the head of the family and the house and given the lack, or the inability to support a family, the pursuing of this profession has simply been replaced through history by occupations and have lately headed more toward the STEM area.*

Study success – prerequisites and obstacles to study success

Personal prerequisites and obstacles to studying

In terms of personal prerequisites for study success, the students primarily emphasize individual characteristics, but do not neglect the influence of family and environmental factors that can contribute to study success, but also represent significant obstacles. The interaction of individual and family characteristics is best illustrated by the following quotes:

> **Petar:** *I don't think it matters that the family is educated, but that it's supportive in everything we do. Especially for those of us who study outside of our place of residence. And it's important for students to organize their time well, to know when it's time for fun and entertainment, and when it's time for learning.*

[15] In addition to students in the humanities, the research also includes students from other gender-atypical ("feminized") areas of study, primarily in the field of education (cf. National Plan, 2019; Eurostat, 2020).

> **Ivan:** *This other variable, the support of the family, well I think it plays a certain role, not quite, I mean in what we're talking about now, I think it's more secondary, that there's more emphasis on the individuality and personality traits of the student himself to achieve success, but, these factors should not be ignored. They may have a secondary role in my opinion and affect the student in some way, but it's not something primary. That's my view.*

Of the individual characteristics that students mention as important for academic success, the most prominent are those that are necessary for meeting student obligations and deadlines, such as diligence, perseverance, discipline, and time management. In terms of family characteristics, students mention two aspects of family characteristics that can be key to successful studying - emotional support of the family and socioeconomic status. At the same time, some of the students give priority to support, and others to the socioeconomic status. Thus, some students stress that parents' level of education plays an important role in successful studies, while others state that education is not as important as emotional support. In doing so, they recognize that students of lower socioeconomic status may find it more difficult to meet student obligations:

> **Tihomir:** *I don't come from a family that's, I'm not in a low socioeconomic status, I have the support of my family in everything I do, not just in education. So I can't really understand how much it actually affects a student, but I think definitely, because what we mentioned, individual characteristics, of course that those individual characteristics will be affected by whether a student has support at home and what's his socioeconomic status. So, even if it's not in the foreground, I'd say it's very, very influential. Given this, I, for example, can devote a lot more energy to studying because I have my own room. Maybe someone doesn't have their own room, maybe it's, I don't know, some kind of home situation, domestic violence.*

> **Petar:** *I think that studying could be made more difficult by the poor economic situation of the family which means that the student is forced to find a job to support himself because his family isn't able to do so, so time is lost that could be used for learning and studying.*

When it comes to other obstacles to academic success, undergraduate students point out that the transition from secondary school to higher education is challenging because of greater content complexity and the need for greater independence in learning, while some students emphasise difficulties with concentration as a factor that can further complicate this transition:

> **Goran:** *So just like the colleague said, this transition is quite, it can be, let's say, difficult for some. I think it'd be useful if these workshops, I mean workshops, I don't know what to call them, reading comprehension, speed reading, I mean something for my field since I study pedagogy and philosophy, it takes a lot of reading, and considering that I wasn't used to doing it so fast, I can't digest the information, I think it'd be useful to have some workshops on how to make it easier, how to master difficult reading texts and the like more easily.*

> **Ivan:** *In general, I know that I've a lot of problems with concentration… and that creates a big problem for me, so then, when I study I have to, I have to take into account to take enough time, to arrange it all properly, and I can physically focus for example this involves that you... but I mean, I've somehow learned to work with it to some extent. Some courses require more concentration, some require less and, so some are more or less difficult to keep up with, but this is generally normal and I've been struggling with it all my life, so I already have some, some strategies developed. But I think that in general the biggest obstacle was, especially in the first semester, to separate from pure learning, I mean really look at where the information is, learn this, write this in the test to more of this as I've said earlier, understanding what you read, to really read, to think, to… but then again that's the difference between high school and faculty so…*

They also note that this transition can be especially difficult for students coming from other places, for whom it is also accompanied by other major changes such as separation from the family and independent living:

Anastazije: *Students who are not from Zagreb find it very difficult considering that the environment's new to them, they live on their own, then there's the stress of studying, the transition from high school to the faculty.*

Belonging to an underrepresented group is not highlighted by any of the students as an aggravating factor to successful study. On the contrary, they note that their small number might even put them in a privileged position:

Vladimir: *Well I think it's definitely easier for us men, both when it comes to grades and attitudes of professors because we're in the minority, let's just say that professors listen to our opinions more. And it's easier for us to get some things that we want than for the girls at the faculty, for the colleagues.*

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

Ivan: *I think maybe it's even the other way around. As I've noticed, sometimes I even get the impression that it's easier for me, not harder, although I don't know if it's just a personal impression. When, for example, we went to certain institutions for internship to see what exactly is happening here in the city and around it in this field of education and the like, how mostly, the employees are female, more than men, react positively to us guys when we like come and learn.*

However, due to their minority status, some of the students have said that they feel the need to shape the way they communicate at the faculty, meaning that when they are expressing their own opinion there is a certain fear that their views will be interpreted as sexist, and those fears are sometimes based on past experiences with colleagues or professors:

Goran: *Personally it's just like my colleagues have already said, I find it a little harder to express my opinion in class, precisely because I'm aware that I'm the only among, the only one among the boys here, so that's a little like, also I'm careful about what I say so that I won't seem sexist, chauvinist or like I got a comment from a professor this week when, there was a break between the seminar and the lecture and then some people went to the toilet, colleagues, and then the professor asked like, "Shall we wait, or not?", I said, nobody said anything, I said, "We can wait for the colleagues to come back", and the professor replied like: "Okay, what do the others think?" like, just to be safe, she literally said that it's so it wouldn't be like the male voice has prevailed.*

Institutional prerequisites and obstacles to studying

Obstacles to study that the students have observed at the level of the institution are mostly unrelated to belonging to an unprivileged group, and primarily concern the organization of studies that is a problem for all students. Of these, the students most often mention difficulties with the schedule, distribution of courses, overload, and too much theoretical content and not enough practice:

Marko: *So, some of the courses that are a requirement, more necessary in the beginning, are delivered later and vice versa. For example, only in the third year, I mean in the third year we have a course that primarily deals with academic literacy, which is like the basis of the academic community and which in the opinion of most stu… colleagues from the year should be covered in the first year. Also, the biggest problem outside of the, of the organization of the faculty in my opinion for me was the distribution of time with regard to the obligations at the faculty and the desired, desires that I had additionally.*

Ratko: *Well I would agree that it's definitely an overload, or rather an uneven distribution is a problem. But I don't think it's a problem at the level of the XXXX faculty of the XXXX University as an institution, but I think it's more of a problem, that is, a disadvantage of the entire education system. In the sense that, in the last, the last two weeks, we have the majority of exams and in fact there's not enough time to prepare, I mean, I speak generally.*

> **Marko:** *The lack of internship is very problematic and the internship that we do is purely a formality, in my opinion, because it's not well structur… at least I think so far I've only been to the internship once because all the others are on the graduate level. But this, the internship that we had was a week in a kindergarten that was not well structured and that was left to, there was space that was left to, the kindergarten itself. It was not supervised by the faculty and the professor, that is, the professor who is the holder of that course. And the experiences varied enormously, meaning from kindergarten to kindergarten and from group to group that went to a particular kindergarten.*

In addition to the schedule and the organization of studies, obstacles at the institutional level include the slow administration, insufficient provision of information and poor material equipment of the faculty, which are mostly connected to the lack of space and the unavailability of literature.

When it comes to instructional help in overcoming obstacles, students are mostly satisfied with the opportunities and support provided to them within the institution. What they are the most satisfied with is the support they receive from professors, whom they consider available and friendly, and always at their disposal when they need help:

> **Ivan:** *Professors are very open to consultations, be they professional, even personal, to some extent, but then again I haven't really had much experience with it, but, but as the colleague said, yes, they are open to, to such things and I think for, let's say for consultations related to an exam, or related to any problems with the study or learning in general they're absolutely open and willing to help as much as possible.*

> **Vladimir:** *Well all the problems I solved with the professors without any problems because they're quite open and accessible. But if it doesn't work out with the professors, we can always go to the vice dean, talk to her or to some higher spheres.*

Students also have access to student counselling and psychological support centres, which they use as needed, although they note that their services are limited due to the number of students who use them:

> **Anastazije:** *Then there's [that] Psychological Support Centre downstairs, but I wouldn't say it's on a high level considering they allow 12 appointments for consultation, and that's kind of too superficial to solve anything if a person really has some deep-seated problem, not to mention the quality and implementation of these psychological treatments and their engagement because I can see that they're really overworked there.*

> **Ratko:** *I also use psychological counselling and I can definitely agree that they're great. And as for the faculty itself, all the problems, if I may call them that, I didn't have many problems, I'd solve everything with professors or my colleagues, I mean friends would help me.*

The problems that the students have, and which cause them to ask for support within the institution are mostly adequately addressed, and the students are satisfied with the provided opportunities. In a smaller number of cases, they have encountered resistance when seeking help, as was the case in the following examples:

> **Petar:** *Well it depends on whether a problem is of a technical nature or it's a problem with a professor. But, they tell us in the Student office that we can always come there if something isn't clear to us, but in fact that's not the case because they don't really mean it. Because when we come there to ask something it always seems like we're forcing them, we're just wasting their time. I think a lot of work should be done on their perception of things.*

> **Ivan:** *While on the other hand, in one of my departments there are professors who are fickle by nature, with whom I'm not sure how to communicate, whether it's wise to address them at all, whether they'll immediately act insulted, like "how dare you ask me that, you should already know that by now." So, it definitely depends a lot on the professor, in both departments.*

Regarding mutual support among students, they feel that there is significant collegiality and that communication is good. They perceive their colleagues (especially female ones) as being ready to help them, and there is often cooperation between students of different years, whether it is formalized at the level of the institution through a programme (e.g. the buddy programme, mentoring programme, etc.), or on a more personal level:

> **Ivan:** *Well I think this is at a high level, that we help each other a lot and that we're often in communication. There are these various groups that we have on social networks, mostly Facebook groups, then there's sharing information with each other if someone doesn't know something, we share learning materials if we need them. Anyone can ask everyone else if they're missing something or for information and the like. I mean, just maybe, it was in my experience, two or three examples of some awkward situations with individual colleagues, but that's rare now. Generally speaking, I think that we're all, regardless, regardless of age, gender, sex, year of study or any other variable, that we communicate well with each other.*

However, even here there are different experiences, so that some students emphasize excellent communication and inclusiveness, while the others have noticed certain gender segregation:

> **Goran:** *I think that in fact, and regarding the fact that we're, let's say a minority, the men, I think that they're even more open to us than let's say, there are few of us, so we are like, I don't know, so they're much more friendly, I am with most of them, with everyone on friendly terms and they never, and every time I asked for help, they all, everyone I asked if they could help me, they helped me, I never got like, like some attitude, which for example I noticed with the girls that among the girls some groups have split away…*
>
> **Stjepan:** *I think that in the visual arts module we also help each other, we share information. The only thing we don't do is study together, the girls organize that in between themselves, and …*
>
> **Vladimir:** *You're not a girl.*

Despite the occasional lack of inclusivity, participants emphasise that they are generally happy with the cooperation and communication within their study groups and faculties, and that they do not perceive themselves as a discriminated group.

Performance and study satisfaction

Most participants have expressed their satisfaction with the study, and the most frequently given reason for satisfaction is the possibility of personal growth offered by the study:

> **Ivan:** *Well I mean, it's all very similar, I like that they really encourage, that they really, how do I put it, encourage, as Herbart nicely said, the inner conflict, they encourage it, they encourage, how do I put it, the reconsidering of your attitudes, they encourage creation, yes, re-examining of attitudes, creating some new measures, just, that nothing is understood as, to me really, it encourages such an active way of thinking, which I mean, again, is what's expected of the faculty, but I'm glad it's happening in practice. And at this level, at such an intense level, that I didn't think it would be this intense with most professors, ok, there are exceptions, but with most professors, they really, encourage, really try to, how do I say it, challenge our, our ideas, our thinking, to make us analyse absolutely everything we've ever thought, just everything. Some are like forcing us to, to improve whether we like it or not, I mean, I mean it in a positive way here. I mean in an absolutely positive way they make us become, I don't know, they absolutely make us receive… as much as possible from this study, and not just to learn, get grades and pass.*

Other reasons for satisfaction include professors, study content, networking with other studies and faculties in Croatia and abroad, and socializing and cooperating with colleagues. Potential dissatisfaction primarily stems from the already mentioned objections related to study organization.

Since they are mostly satisfied with their studies, all participants expect to successfully complete the current study. It should be taken into account that many of them have previously been on other study programmes and already have the experience of dropping out. That is why they say that giving up their current studies is not an option:

> **Goran:** *I went to something completely different, I went to XXXX. I studied there for two years and then I worked for another two years, so I was supposed to be in my fourth year now, so yes, I'm definitely not thinking about giving up, this is my, this is my last, last chance, I mean it's not, but that's how I think about it, so no, it's not even, it's not an option for me to give up.*

Accordingly, students say that successful completion of studies depends mostly on themselves and their motivation:

> **Vladimir:** *Well I think I'll finish successfully, definitely. And this mostly depends on me, like most things in my life. I think you're the only one who works in the end.*

Convictions about successful completion of studies are also related to the aspirations towards continuing studies at the doctoral level - most students who participated in focus groups state that one day they would like to continue their education at a higher level. On the other hand, worries related to the study are primarily focused on the period after graduation, i.e. on employment opportunities and acquired competencies:

> **Ivan:** *There's always this fear about what exactly the future brings, where I see myself in maybe five years, what exactly will I do, what job will I have, will I be happy, will I earn enough, like materially and more of these factors. So yes, always, usually it's, maybe it's a harsh word, but I take comfort in the fact that everything comes in its own time and that over time there'll be some opportunity that I can use. And, on the other hand, I am a little hesitant about that future, but I try to prepare for it, by asking as many questions as possible, informing myself as much as possible and learning as much as possible.*

> **Tihomir:** *And somehow, I don't know, I have a feeling, I mean, I have two more years ahead of me, but I have a feeling that I'm going to come out of the university somehow unequipped with that kind of knowledge for life, practical knowledge. I have no doubt that I will get it, it's just that somehow, I think more of it should be incorporated into the studies.*

When it comes to planning mobility abroad, some students would like to spend some time abroad during their studies, while others are not considering it, which is also not related to belonging to an underprivileged group.

Life during studying

In terms of life during the studies, the students are mostly satisfied with the amount of free time and additional activities offered to them at or outside the faculty, such as volunteering, foreign language courses, travel opportunities etc. Among the obstacles that they have singled out in connection to life during studies, dissatisfaction with the reputation of their future professions in society stands out. This dissatisfaction is primarily related to the perception of the professions as easy, because the students feel that these professions are not valued enough, but also to the financial aspects of their future professions:

> **Vladimir:** *I agree with that, because it's always like, and the teacher, that's nothing, anyone can do it. And I've heard a lot of times that some were in that role for a short while, they tried to do something for 5 minutes and then there was total chaos. And then, hats off to you if you can keep them interested, and then do some actual work with them. And I think it's also the problem of the state that doesn't contribute to that, because in my opinion health care and education should be the two main things, both in the financial sense and in terms of values and morals. Because if you have those two things you have an exponential growth of the society, and not like what we have now, that we have to go on strike for two months to get a 100 Kuna increase in salary.*

The participants mostly live with their parents, and all of them have said that they have significant family support, most of them both financial and emotional, except for one participant whose parents do not approve of his choice of studies:

> **Anastazije:** *I, I have of course my family's financial support, all of it costs money, but maybe I'm missing it a little emotionally at the moment because my parents are both excellent scientists in the field of XXXX, I gave up on it so now I'm studying something that they don't consider science.*

Participants mostly assess their finances as adequate for keeping up with the demands of student life, and some of them also benefit from the scholarship they receive. Those who receive a scholarship are satisfied with scholarship opportunities, while those who do not receive it think that the criteria are too high and that they lack information on scholarship opportunities.

Conclusion and suggestions

The difficulties encountered by male students in the humanities are most often not related to their belonging to an underrepresented group, but are common to all students at their faculties. The most frequently mentioned obstacles relate to the organization of studies, such as class schedules that include longer breaks during the day, which prolongs the total time spent at the faculty, and a large amount of material that has to be learned in short time, which in some ways discourages continuous learning.

The male students in the humanities do not consider that belonging to an underrepresented group is an obstacle to successful study; on the contrary, they say that it can even be an advantage in certain situations. However, they are aware of a certain stigmatization of men in the humanities, which results in fewer men enrolling in those faculties. They recognize this as a problem at the level of the whole society, which is caused by a perceived lower reputation of professions from the humanities and the consequent lower expected financial income of their future professions. This is in contrast with the traditional male gender role, which is why men are not encouraged to pursue professions in this field. Moreover, the prevailing opinion is that they are not as good in such activities, and they are therefore directed to other studies, mostly to the "male" studies in the technical field. Students perceive this as a deep social problem, which cannot be solved by intervention at the level of the institution or by the education system itself, but by systematically changing gender roles and perceptions of "male" versus "female" occupations. As the first step in this direction, they see the active promotion of studies in the humanities and highlighting the experiences of male students in these studies.

The study experiences of students who participated in this research are consistent with the experiences of social pedagogy students at the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences in Zagreb, who also reported on the perception of positive discrimination of men in their field, but also on the need for gender balance (Ćosić, 2018).

In conclusion, the awareness of belonging to an underrepresented group is most pronounced in choosing studies and before enrolment, and has only a slight effect on the study experience of male students in the humanities. In other words, it can be concluded that it is more necessary to remove obstacles to male students' enrolment in the humanities study programmes than it is to intervene in the study experience itself. These obstacles are rooted in social values, and require systematic interventions in order to enrol more men in faculties in the humanities.

5.2.7. Students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans[16]

On study selection

Students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans who participated in the research study at faculties in various fields of science (natural, biomedical, social, humanities, technical, and biotechnical) in Osijek, Split, Zagreb, and Zadar, with the main reason for choosing the study most often being intrinsic interest in the study field (content). Other reasons for choosing the studies include compliance with the high school programme the students completed and the chosen field of study, poor performance at the State Matura, inability to enrol in the first choice study or parental advice on which study to choose. The students did not state any reasons that could be directly related to their belonging to the group of children of Croatian Homeland War veterans. Also, when asked directly, all participants said that belonging to this vulnerable group had no effect on their decision to study or on the choice of study.

Since there are measures to facilitate enrolment in higher education for students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans (additional points, direct enrolment in the study), some of the students have used these advantages when enrolling or being placed in a student dorm:

> **Jadranka:** *Only for the dorm. For the dorm you get, I think, 100 or 200 points based on the fact that your parent is a Croatian Homeland War veteran. If it's not the highest category, if it's the highest, I think you even have direct enrolment or something.*
>
> **Smiljana:** *So, I was in the dorm for the first year and I got direct enrolment because of that.*
>
> **Petra:** *I am a child of a 100% Croatian war invalid, so I had direct enrolment if I crossed the point threshold for any of the faculties.*

However, the students had different attitudes towards the possibility of having an advantage when enrolling in the study on the basis of additional points given to the children of Croatian Homeland War veterans. An example of a positive attitude towards such a measure is expressed in the following paragraph:

> **Vladimira:** *Yes, it's good that it gives us some opportunity and some extra points and all that.*

Unlike Vladimira, Petra does not think that the advantage during enrolment is necessarily a good measure, because they enable enrolment in study programmes for students who would otherwise not meet the required criteria, which may prove to be a negative circumstance during the study:

> **Petra:** *But I think it was a bad, bad thing because if I didn't have that opportunity [enrolment advantage] then I wouldn't have enrolled in mechanical engineering because I, I met the point threshold, but I didn't, I was below the line of those who could enrol.*

Also, some students have mentioned the uneven practice for awarding points:

> **Smiljana:** *I think there's direct enrolment at certain faculties, but I, personally, didn't.*

[16] Students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans who participated in the research were invited to participate on the basis of belonging to a wider category of students of children of Croatian Homeland War veterans, and not to any of the specific subgroups (e.g. students who are children of 100% war invalids, students who are children of killed and missing veterans). Students from this group can apply for a scholarship from the Ministry of Croatian Veterans and get additional points when applying for other state scholarships, as well as for accommodation in a dormitory. If they meet the conditions for enrolment, students who are children of Croatian war veterans have an advantage when enrolling to some HEIs. According to the MSE data, in the academic year 2019/2020 there was a total of 5,274 student children of Croatian veterans on a state scholarship.

Mirjana: *So, there's a rule, like when you're enrolling in high school and the university, the children of killed or captured Homeland War veterans have direct enrolment. But these are special cases. Because, for example, when enrolling in high school, the rules say that children of Croatian Homeland War veterans in general have two additional points for each veteran parent. So, like, when my brother was enrolling in high school, he was missing some points for that general high school he wanted, both of his parents are veterans, he didn't get a single point. So, even though he said it and even brought the paper that both his parents are Croatian Homeland War veterans, it was not recognised. We don't know what the reason was. Okay, he finally managed to enrol in another thing. For example, points were given for learning a language in a foreign language school, so he earned points on that account, but not on this one.*

Study success – prerequisites and obstacles to study success

Personal prerequisites and obstacles to studying

The interviewed students generally believe that the most important prerequisites for a successful study are study motivation and efforts devoted to studying. Other important factors include persistence, desire and willingness to study, but also someone's work habits, regularity in attending classes and fulfilling obligations, diligence, continuity of studying and organization.

As important family characteristics that are necessary for successful studying, the students mostly emphasize the need for family support, primarily financial and psychological support. Some students mention that older siblings can also help, and security and stability in the family is cited as a supporting factor for studying.

Speaking generally about possible obstacles to studying, students most often cite a difficult financial situation, which may apply to students who are children of veterans, but also to those who are not:

Jadranka: *I have a friend, her father went out, who is disabled and his pension is not enough to send her to college. And he doesn't have enough money to support her. There are three of them and she didn't get the opportunity.*

Other obstacles include the necessity to travel to the faculty (from the place of residence to the place of study), taking care of children during studies, working during studies, mental health problems, low motivation for studying, and lack of self-confidence, while the students of more demanding study programmes also mentioned the burn-out syndrome that often occurs in students with exacting study requirements. Among other obstacles, one student cited life in a student dorm as an aggravating circumstance for studying, because she spends a lot of time performing basic living activities.

Regarding family characteristics that can be an obstacle to successful studying, students have singled out problematic family relations or a difficult family situation, and one student mentioned family pressure related to study expectations that had a demotivating effect.

Regarding specific family circumstances related to the fact that they are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans, the participants personally did not have major problems in the family because of this and did not connect this to their personal study experience:

Researcher: *And do you think that, as children of Croatian Homeland War veterans, it is harder for you to study in some sense or to be successful at the faculty?*

Vladimira: *No.*

Petra: *No.*

Mirko: *It all depends on whether that child, whether the parents have exercised their rights. If they did, then it doesn't make it difficult for him, if they didn't, it can absolutely make it difficult for him. Now I*

don't know what the general situation is in Croatia in that regard. It doesn't make it hard for me.

Vesna: *Maybe the health of parents and us as children. But then again, I don't think it's so closely related to the fact that our parents are veterans. We're not the only ones whose parents are sick with something. This can generally be seen as an aggravating circumstance for students. Perhaps the veteran population is somewhat more vulnerable.*

Although they themselves did not experience that their living situation or enrolment in studies was made more difficult due to their veteran parents, the students mentioned experiences of friends or acquaintances who had difficulties due to some problems that are characteristic for the veteran population:

Petra: *And I really think it's a matter of the parents' attitude, so for example, my dad was trying to make everything at home normal, so that we don't feel it that much. For example, there are families in which one simply cannot control themselves. I know from conversation with friends and others that I don't know there's this stress, these sudden mood swings, I mean I also have these sudden mood swings at home, but it's not so pronounced that it would affect me, but for example they were very, very affected, to the point that they went to work right after high school so that they could move out of their homes.*

Vladimira: *I mean, my dad, just before he went to war was working for the police, so then the stress and such mental situations didn't affect him psychologically that much, so he's pretty stable because he was already used to such stressful situations and then, at home, we were all lucky in that the war didn't affect him that much psychologically, but again I mean I know that I'm quite lucky in that, unlike some others who were greatly affected by the war.*

Sandra: *Likewise. For me, okay I've never had an obstacle because of it, but there are some children of veterans whose parents simply came out very damaged from it. Both mentally and some physically and perhaps in that way they transferred to their children, unwittingly, that psychological burden. I don't know, not to go into details now, but in that way they can unconsciously make it harder for their children mentally because they put some mental burden on them because of what they lived through.*

Institutional prerequisites and obstacles to studying

Most students cite the organization of studies as an aggravating circumstance at the institutional level, and talk about sudden changes in schedules and rules, frequent staff changes within the institution, inflexibility of the institution in terms of obligatory attendance, but also some curricular aspects, such as courses that are not related to the study direction, or too much theory and not enough practical knowledge and internship. They also see poor quality or inaccessible professors as institutional obstacles, as well as certain material aspects - poor material equipment of the faculty and outdated literature and materials, as well as the spatial dislocation of institutions. The students did not mention institutional barriers that would be related to their status as children of war veterans.

Regarding the obstacles to a successful study at the level of the higher education system, the students also did not connect them with their belonging to the group of students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans. Among other obstacles, some students highlighted the need to centralize universities, relocate faculties, and increase student scholarships:

Marija: *Well, I'd like those scholarships to be higher, 5,000 Kuna is awful low for students, and 2,000 Kuna for schoolchildren is like a slap in the face, it's too little.*

The students have generally stated that institutions help them with overcoming obstacles they have or may encounter during their studies. This help is manifested through the support of professors and the faculties' administrative staff. In one interview, the students expressed dissatisfaction because they rarely see some professors and thus cannot expect support from them when they need it in connection to fulfilling student obligations.

When asked what specific help they need at the level of the institution (faculty), students who are children of veterans mentioned the lack of internship and the need for its organization and implementation as part of the study. They also expressed a desire for faster feedback from professors during the writing of the final paper. However, these suggestions for specific assistance at the institution level do not address the needs that are specific to students who are children of Croatian veterans, but are generally applicable to all students.

Most students state that they have someone to turn to for help at their faculty when they have a problem (e.g. professors, colleagues, student office staff), and that they are satisfied with the opportunities for seeking help. They also report that most of the specific problems that they have had so far were successfully addressed. In one conversation, dissatisfaction with the faculty staff's disorganization and lack of information was mentioned.

Students generally evaluate communication with their professors as positive. In other words, they say professors are mostly approachable and accommodating. A small number of professors do not fulfil their obligations, e.g. they do not hold consultations at the stated time, and students cannot reach them when they need to.

Also, students are generally satisfied with the communication and support among students and state that they help each other with learning, socializing and exchanging information through social networks. A small number of students is not satisfied with the students' mutual support. For example, they mention a lack of communication and exchange of relevant study-related information or negative competitiveness among students.

The students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans did not mention any problems in relations with professors and colleagues that would arise from their status as children of war veterans. Also, their status was rarely the subject of conversation with colleagues (not because the topic was sensitive, but because it was not so relevant to their study experience).

Performance and study satisfaction

Opinions of students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans regarding satisfaction with their studies were divided. However, students who are dissatisfied with their studies also give reasons for dissatisfaction that are not related to their status as children of war veterans (for example: uninteresting studies, not enough internship, low level of study requirements, etc.).

All students expect to successfully complete their studies, i.e. to successfully enrol in a higher level of education. They believe that their future success in studying will mostly depend on themselves, i.e. on factors such as motivation and the ability to organize their own time. The students generally do not think about giving up their studies. The few students who occasionally considered dropping out have overcome those moments. Two of the interviewed students dropped out of their previous studies, but do not plan on dropping out of their current studies.

Students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans have different opinions on whether they want to participate in mobility during their studies. Among those who have expressed a desire to spend part of their studies abroad, a small number of students have a specific plan, e.g. they state the specific scholarship for which they have applied or intend to apply, and the country they would like to go to. Students who do not intend to participate in mobility say that it seems too complicated for them, that they are not sure whether their home faculty would recognize the obligations discharged as part of the mobility, or that they are not sure whether they meet the criteria for student mobility at all. Two students participated in mobility abroad during high school.

When discussing mobility, students did not mention any specific needs that would arise from their status as children of war veterans, but only those that apply to all groups of students.

Life during studying

When asked to single out what they are most satisfied with in their lives outside the studies, students who are children of veterans mostly talk about hanging out with friends and making new acquaintances as sources of satisfaction. Also, in the same context, they mentioned free time, student jobs and various opportunities provided by the faculty (e.g. library, material equipment of the institution, organization of various lectures and activities), and some of them were satisfied with all the aspects of their lives. The students also mentioned certain obstacles they have encountered in connection with their studies: the schedule of faculty obligations that made it difficult for them to organize other obligations, and the long commute to the faculty.

Study participants who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans have the financial and emotional support of their families and other close people for studying. Most students live with their parents, while a smaller number live in student dorms or rented private accommodation. They are satisfied with the living conditions as well as with their financial situation.

Some students receive or have at some point received scholarships awarded by various bodies at the state or local level. Some of these scholarships are intended specifically for children of Croatian Homeland War veterans:

> **Zoran:** *I got a university scholarship from the Ministry of Veterans, last year…*

However, a large number of students is not satisfied with scholarship opportunities due to problems related to the transparency of scholarship competitions and award criteria:

> **Mirko:** *I'm, the Ministry of Veterans, I don't know… So, the situation with that Ministry is that, in 3 to 4 years, one year I get it, the next year I don't. And their criteria are, that budgetary base is 60%, and I got it one year… our income is always the same, sometimes I get it, sometimes I don't. He got a scholarship, university one, me and my sister are waiting for the results. And now, from the last I've heard, I probably won't get it, I can get it. I don't know if any of you has any experience with that. The problem is that their calls, the results are not published, they send them to your home address and then you don't know why. This was already in the newspaper.*

> **Smiljana:** *As for this scholarship from the Ministry of Veterans, that scholarship is a huge problem. The call is announced, you apply for the call, you send all the papers and on one occasion this happened to me, everyone won, my sister won, but my papers aren't there. And then dad called them and asked, they said I hadn't sent some document, and it's not like I hadn't checked 100 times, so that's, it's really, there are a lot of problems, and they don't tell you anything. You didn't send the papers, so-and-so gets it, they just announce who got it, it doesn't say anything. This is a problem and the problem is that these veterans' scholarships are never paid in monthly instalments, but you always get it in one instalment, those 3,000 Kuna, and it's usually in September.*

> **Smiljana:** *No, it's an economic, I mean, 60% of the budgetary base and then they have categories, of course, those who are welfare cases have the most points, then you get extra points on the account of your parents being veterans, so you get extra points if you have a child, if your parent has died or disappeared. You get extra points, but again some people get them who in my opinion shouldn't.*

Also, some students have had problems with the complicated administrative requirements of applying to those calls, to the extent that they even gave up on claiming scholarships:

> **Vesna:** *But, that, I gave up on it [scholarship of the Ministry of Veterans] because there's so much paperwork, so much wrangling, like Marija says, for this pittance, which you have to wait for I don't even know how long, it never comes on time…*

> **Marija:** *Every year you have to get a certificate that your parent is a war, war invalid, as if that can ever change. Literally, such banalities that parents have to go around town, get a thousand papers, I also gave up on that scholarship.*

Some students feel that the amount of scholarships is too small to cover the cost of student life:

> **Smiljana:** *And 1,200 Kuna does not cover some things. Especially, like she said, if someone is living in another city, the costs are much higher.*

In one conversation, a proposal emerged that it would be more reasonable to award a smaller number of bigger scholarships, and thus help the most vulnerable students:

> **Smiljana:** *So that state scholarship, they give the biggest number of scholarships, this year I think they distributed 12 thousand scholarships, that's cumulatively a huge amount. However, I think that it'd be better to give a smaller number, with a larger amount, that would go to the neediest. Especially for those, there's a special category, that is, additional points are given if they're on welfare. Quite a lot of students get that and there's a very large number of students who have that, let's say, maximum number of points, that are at the top of the list, what will they do with those 1,200 Kuna if they really receive welfare checks. So, I think it would be smarter, that we who are, some middle class, don't actually get that scholarship but that it goes to someone else.*

When asked to compare their lives during their studies with the lives of other students, the children of Croatian Homeland War veterans generally rate their lives as better. However, they do not connect this with their belonging to the group of students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans, but with other circumstances, such as studying in the place of residence, more free time compared to students of other faculties and the like.

Conclusion and suggestions

Based on conversations with students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans, it can be concluded that they share similar study experiences as other students. They cited mostly intrinsic motives for HEI enrolment and feel that being children of veterans did not influence their choices. Some of the interviewed students used the rights that they have as children of veterans when enrolling in studies or finding accommodation in a student dorm. The students have different opinions on whether these rights are justified or not, as well as on the criteria for awarding points for exercising these rights.

Although they did not personally have major problems during their studies that were caused by the fact that they are children of veterans, focus group participants cited the experiences of friends or acquaintances who had difficulties due to their parents' problems that are specific to the veteran population (e.g. impaired mental and/or physical health of parents).

Students have encountered various institutional obstacles during their studies, but these problems are not related to their belonging to an underrepresented group of children of Croatian Homeland War veterans (e.g. problems related to the organization of studies, lack of practical work, individual inadequate or inaccessible professors, material equipment of the faculty and so on).

Most students are satisfied with the support they receive from professors and colleagues at their faculties, as well as with the possibilities to solve potential problems they can encounter during the studies. Although some students are not satisfied with their studies, they all expect that they will successfully complete them, i.e. that they will enrol in a higher level of education.

In their lives outside of studies, study participants who are children of war veterans cite socialising with friends and making new acquaintances as the most common sources of satisfaction. They feel that they have the financial and emotional support of their families and other loved ones.

However, given the possible stressors that students who are children of Croatian war veterans may face in their families, it is necessary to sensitize the staff in charge of psychological counselling at HEIs to possible difficulties faced by students from this group.

Some students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans receive various scholarships, some of which are aimed specifically at this group of students. In the interviews, the students problematized the scholarship calls and requirements for getting certain scholarships. Due to complicated administrative requirements, some students give up claiming scholarships. Also, some students feel that scholarship amounts are quite low and insufficient to cover the cost of student life. Based on these insights, certain conclusions and recommendations can be drawn that could facilitate the studies of this group of students.

The main recommendations concern the reduction of administrative obstacles that accompany the application procedure and an increase of the amount of scholarships for students who are children of war veterans. Also, in the future, more attention should be paid to the transparency of the criteria for different scholarships, as well as to the results of scholarship calls. The administrative requirements for applying to competitions should be relaxed so that students do not have to submit the same documentation to competent authorities several times. For example, there should be a direct exchange of the necessary information between various competent bodies. Furthermore, the possibility of redistributing the amount of scholarships in such a way as to help the most vulnerable students with a more generous amount should be considered. It is also recommended that all the necessary information on scholarships should be easily accessible to students, for example on the websites of the institutions (higher education institutions).

6.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS WITH RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1. Literature review of recent studies on underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students in Croatia

6.2. Analysis of recent national policies and strategic documents of higher education institutions in Croatia related to the social dimension of higher education

6.3. Analysis of the student experience of selected underrepresented and vulnerable groups with a focus on recognising obstacles to studying

6.4. Recommendations

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS WITH RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this study was to conduct an empirical analysis of the conditions and assumptions for enhancing the social dimension of higher education in the Republic of Croatia. Thus, this aim included several research questions:

- What are the recent findings on underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students in Croatia?
- How do the recent national policies and strategic documents of universities, polytechnics and colleges address the social dimension of higher education?
- What is the study experience of students from the selected underrepresented and vulnerable groups?
- What are the reasons for a more difficult study experience or potential exclusion from the higher education system of students from underrepresented and vulnerable groups?
- What are the study-related needs of students from underrepresented and vulnerable groups?

Answering the research questions implied the usage of the following analytical procedures: 1. review of the literature on recent studies on underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students in Croatia; 2. analysis of the recent national policies and strategic documents of HEIs in Croatia related to the social dimension of higher education; and 3. a qualitative analysis of the student experience of selected underrepresented and vulnerable groups with a focus on identifying obstacles to studying.

6.1. Literature review of recent studies on underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students in Croatia

A review of studies on underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students, which builds on a similar 2016 review by the National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education (National Plan, 2019), identified 28 references that originally introduced new insights into one or more underrepresented or vulnerable groups in higher education in the Republic of Croatia. Of the mentioned groups, no new research has been identified that would provide empirical insights into the access and vulnerability of **students who commute to their place of study, LGBTQ+ students, students with asylum/refugee status**, as well as **students at risk of becoming homeless**. We consolidated the insights into the aspirations of high school **students whose parents have a lower level of education**, who demonstrate less ambition than the children of better educated parents, even when they attend the same type of school. Students of less educated parents are more often represented in three-year vocational programmes that do not allow them to take the State Matura exam, and they are underrepresented in general secondary school programmes. Enrolled students from this group still rely more on working to cover the costs of living, and show a weaker mobility experience, but between 2010 and 2016 there was a positive shift in terms of their increased representation in awarded scholarships and student accommodations. Important knowledge was also gained about access to higher education for **young people of lower socioeconomic status** through several studies on young people growing up in poverty. These young people still face multiple barriers in accessing higher education - from financial problems to their families' cultural and social resources – that result in less ambitious aspirations and less favourable educational careers. In the Roma population, there is a perception of increased **participation of the Roma minority** in higher education, although the 2017 baseline survey showed that only 2.7% of participants aged 19-25 studied. There are indications that the dropout rate is high, and a pronounced problem with the access to higher education stems from the fact that Roma children, despite significantly increased participation in secondary education, rarely enrol in four-year secondary schools, and almost never in general secondary school programmes. Recent papers have confirmed extremely rare transitions from three-year programmes to higher education for **students who have completed vocational education**, but also the trend of decreasing the share of the cohort from four-year

secondary school programmes that successfully pass the State Matura. At the level of aspirations, they are evidently lower in students in three-year programmes, while a detailed study of students in fouryear programmes identified lower and more pragmatic aspirations and poorer knowledge in students of vocational programmes. A positive shift is the slightly increased frequency of scholarships for students who have previously completed vocational schools. When it comes to **students from rural areas and small towns**, several analyses have identified their somewhat weaker aspirations to study and more frequent participation in vocational education, but for now there is no thorough analysis of factors that hinder study access or of the study process for this group. **Gender segregation of the student body** in certain educational areas has not decreased in recent years, and has been the subject of attention of only one particular study of the experiences of male students within one study for a helping profession. Consistent findings on the patterns of **working while studying** were obtained through several sources - within a given year, about 70% of students are engaged in some form of paid work, with those working full-time often perceiving themselves primarily as employees. No major differences in occurrences and patterns were found here compared to the previous Eurostudent surveys, although all surveys were conducted before the option of working through student contracts was opened to part-time students in late 2018. Main among the reasons for working is to cover the costs of living, but the acquisition of new experiences and knowledge is also widely represented. Jobs were closely related to the study only in a quarter of cases. **Mature students** and **students with children**, which are two groups that largely overlap, were not the subject of analysis except in the Eurostudent VI survey, which repeated the finding that mature students typically take degrees in less prestigious professional studies, but also that they exhibit a high commitment to graduating and getting a degree. Several papers have been dedicated to the challenges and prejudices faced by **students with disabilities**, as well as the possibilities of participatory implementation of educational policies for this group. Likewise, evident progress has been achieved in understanding the multiple challenges in accessing higher education for **students from alternative care systems**. In the period under consideration, extremely valuable studies were published that analyse the school success of the **children of deceased Croatian Homeland War veterans**. Even with all the current support, these children, regardless of whether their parents died during the war or committed suicide later, as well as **children of 100% military invalids**, achieve slightly lower success in school and at the State Matura compared to their peers, which can hinder their access to higher education. Although scholarship instruments exist, what is missing are studies on the experience of attending higher education for this group.

6.2. Analysis of recent national policies and strategic documents of higher education institutions in Croatia related to the social dimension of higher education

Analysis of the recent national policies (performance agreements between HEIs and the MSE, the Strategy of Education, Science and Technology, the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia 2019 - 2020 and accompanying documents, the Operational Programme Efficient Human Resources (2014 - 2020), the priority axis of education and lifelong learning) related to the improvement of the social dimension of higher education indicates a certain expansion of the understanding of the social dimension at that level, primarily with regard to recognizing underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students. Such development is indicated by differences in the definition of target groups between the first performance agreements, when only three groups were identified (students with disabilities, students of lower socioeconomic status and mature students), and the National Plan developed by the National Group for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education, which identified a total of eighteen underrepresented and vulnerable groups. However, despite this development, the focus of national policies as well as funds awarded through the European Social Fund is only on students with disabilities and those of lower socioeconomic status. It should also be noted that the latest performance agreements define the obligations of HEIs towards these

two groups more generally than the previous ones. The analysis of HEIs strategic documents aimed to determine the extent to which the goals, measures, and activities of HEIs correspond to the objectives of the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education. The findings have disclosed that, for seven of the 24 sub-goals defined in the framework of the main objectives of the National Plan (and for which HEIs are listed as being solely or partly responsible for implementation), there were no corresponding objectives in the strategic documents of any HEI, which may be partly explained by the assumption that addressing them requires the cooperation of HEIs at the national level as well as additional funding. In terms of the addressed sub-goals, HEIs mostly refer to students with disabilities and students of lower socioeconomic status. The fact that the conducted research and measures proposed to HEIs have yielded the most insight for these two groups probably facilitates the planning of goals and the selection of specific measures and activities. In their documents, HEIs mention part-time students less frequently, usually in connection to the adjustment of studies to this group, while some HEIs also mention students outside the place of residence and mature students. Other underrepresented and vulnerable groups included in the National Plan are not explicitly mentioned in the strategic documents, which is why there are no precise measures or activities for facilitating their access to higher education, providing support during studies, or increasing their completion rates. Part of the strategic goals that address the objectives from the National Plan refer to the student population as a whole (e.g. providing student internships, monitoring their employment, or activities related to increasing interest in access to higher education), but dealing with those problems does not offer measures and activities that would respond to the specific needs of vulnerable and underrepresented groups in higher education. On the other hand, setting such less specific goals, in addition to those dedicated to, for example, students with disabilities or students of lower socioeconomic status, opens the possibility of their adaptation and use to improve the status of various underrepresented and vulnerable groups (e.g. mentoring and intangible support systems for the needs of students with disabilities, which could be adapted to the needs of other vulnerable groups). Finally, it should be noted that we have analysed the set objectives, or rather their formal representation. Given that there is no systematic data on the implementation of the prescribed objectives, it is not possible to draw conclusions about the success of achieving these objectives.

6.3. Analysis of the student experience of selected underrepresented and vulnerable groups with a focus on recognising obstacles to studying

Qualitative analysis of the data collected in interviews with the selected under-researched groups of underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students (students with asylum/refugee status, students belonging to the Roma minority, LGBTQ+ students, students from alternative care systems, female students in the technical field, male students in the humanities, and students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans) shows that their student experience includes very heterogeneous elements of "vulnerability". When it comes to **students with asylum/refugee status**, the dominant obstacles are institutional or administrative in nature and related to the unavailability of information and untransparent process of enrolment in HEIs or the recognition of previous qualifications. Furthermore, a significant problem for this group is the insufficient knowledge of the Croatian language, which in some cases makes it impossible to enrol in higher education immediately after receiving a decision on their status. In this regard, it is worth mentioning a number of difficulties (such as the organization of the schedule or too few lessons) related to exercising their right to legally guaranteed Croatian language courses. Among the difficulties faced by students with the asylum status, the financial aspect should also be singled out, as these students do not apply for existing scholarship calls and most often cannot count on financial assistance from their families. Therefore, students from this group typically have to work in addition to their studies, which makes it difficult to coordinate their work and study obligations.

The difficulties and obstacles faced by **students belonging to the Roma minority** largely reflect the disadvantaged position of the Roma community within the wider society. Since Roma families in Croatia are often at risk of poverty, a difficult obstacle for students in this group is their challenging financial situation. The costs of studies are therefore largely covered by the scholarships available to them. In addition to scholarships that students receive, they occasionally work while studying, which can negatively affect the fulfilment of their study obligations. In addition to financial difficulties, students of the Roma national minority also face the problem of discrimination and stigmatization in the wider society as well as among their colleagues at the HEIs. This identity aspect of the obstacles faced by Roma students includes incomplete knowledge of the Croatian language as well as close family members' lack of understanding and support for their studies. In addition, there are noticeable concerns about how they will be accepted by the social environment, both during their studies and after graduation. Among the difficulties encountered by students from this group, we should also mention their often insufficient secondary education (e.g. regarding foreign languages), which often does not meet the set expectations at HEIs.

LGBTQ+ students face various impediments that arise from their belonging to a vulnerable group. In the first place, there are psychological difficulties caused by insecurity and fear of rejection or denunciation by family members, friends, or professors and colleagues. Mental difficulties such as depression or anxiety can have negative consequences on the students' social life (e.g. isolation from the social environment and friends), but also for the regular fulfilment of study obligations (lack of motivation to learn, missing lectures or assignments, etc.). The source of everyday stress is also the homophobia of the environment, both in the wider society and at HEIs. At the faculty, homophobia can be manifested in various ways, for example in the form of offensive and/or stereotypical content in certain courses, insufficient organizational sensitivity for the specific needs of LGBTQ+ students, and their generally poor visibility at the institution level, including a lack of relevant information and institutional assistance. Another problem for the LGBTQ+ students can come from disturbed family relations following the revealing of their sexual identity (outing). This development can lead to parental disownment or a denial of financial assistance, which can cause students to fear for their existential security and the continuation of their studies.

Specific difficulties encountered by **students from alternative care systems** during their studies may be related to material and socio-emotional barriers to their studies. Among the possible material obstacles, the uncertainty of the right to scholarships and dormitory accommodation stands out, since both depend on the status of full-time students. Such situation causes insecurity and stress in students due to the pressure to meet the study obligations on time that is present for the entire duration of the study. Furthermore, part-time students from the alternative care cannot exercise the right to a student dormitory, which is why their monthly scholarship typically does not cover their study-related costs. The social and emotional barriers to study include distrust of the social environment, problematic family relations, misunderstanding and lack of support from loved ones, and possible psychological problems. All of the above can have a negative impact on the fulfilment of study obligations, for example in the form of difficulties with studying or the loss of study motivation. These difficulties may be particularly pronounced in the periods of transition, when students move from the alternative care system to a new academic and social environment, or at the end of their studies when existential problems related to the termination of their scholarship and uncertainty about finding their first job become pressing. All these obstacles gain additional weight due to the fact that the issue of students from the alternative care is usually out of the focus of teaching and other staff at the HEIs.

Although the study experiences of **female students in the technical field** are largely similar to the experiences of other students, female students from this group encounter different pressures and gender stereotypes related to the choice of studies even before enrolment. It is therefore reasonable to assume that a significant proportion of girls may give up enrolling in technical studies due to pressure from family members or other close people. While some students believe that gender differences are

not related to study barriers, others indicate that during their studies they have encountered prejudices that technical studies are a "male" field and that women have no place in technical HEIs. These prejudices can be manifested in communication with professors and/or male students, but also in the social environment in general. A smaller number of female students also believe that there are differences between girls and boys in experiences or prior knowledge and ways of cognitive functioning that can make it more difficult for girls to study technical studies. For students at technical faculties, the fear of gender discrimination in the labour market after graduation can also be a psychological difficulty. Apart from the insufficient hygienic infrastructure at the faculties and gender prejudices of some professors, the institutional barriers that students from this group encounter during their studies are not related to their belonging to an underrepresented gender group (e.g. problems related to study organization, administration, or material equipment of the faculties).

Belonging to an underrepresented gender group is not really perceived by **male students in the humanities** as an obstacle to success in their studies. Nevertheless, there is an awareness among students of a certain stigmatization of men in "the humanities". According to the students, the latter is associated with a lower reputation of professions in the humanities, lower financial income of future employment, as well as the fact that occupations in this area are mostly perceived as traditionally "female" occupations (as opposed to traditionally "male" occupations in the technical field). Students therefore state that the mere fact that they know in advance that they will be in the minority may deter them from enrolling in the humanities. When it comes to individual and institutional barriers to academic success, students list those that are common to all students regardless of gender (e.g. difficulty concentrating, inadequate class schedule, or overload of study content). The fact that, as men, they are a gender underrepresented group at their faculties is not cited by students as a difficulty, but as a possible advantage. The reason for this is a certain benevolence on the part of professors towards male students (conditioned by their underrepresentation in the studies), which can be manifested in everyday communication and differences in the level of respect awarded to students' opinions. Students also say that they are mostly satisfied with the cooperation and communication within their study groups, and that they do not perceive themselves as a discriminated group even at that (collegial) level.

The difficulties and obstacles that the interviewed **students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans** encounter in their studies are generally not related to belonging to a vulnerable group. But despite the fact that, as children of war veterans, they did not have major problems during their studies, students pointed to the experiences of friends or acquaintances who had difficulties due to their parents' problems characteristic for the veteran population. What is especially emphasised are the possible psychological problems of parents that act as stressors in families and can constrain their children in their educational choices and experiences. Institutional obstacles encountered during their studies relate to problems caused by the inflexibility of the institutions in terms of attendance obligations, material equipment of faculties, or individual low quality or inaccessible professors, which are the same for the general student population and are not connected to their underrepresented group. When it comes to other obstacles, some students have problematized the calls and requirements for obtaining scholarships, primarily those aimed at children of veterans. It was stated that the amounts of scholarships are quite low and often insufficient to cover the cost of student life, and that some students give up their claims to a scholarship due to the complicated administrative requirements. Given the addressed obstacles faced by students who are children of Croatian war veterans, one should bear in mind that they relate to the overall war veteran population and their student children and that, depending on the specific category of war veteran population (deceased and missing war veterans, 100% military invalids etc.), there may be significant differences within this group in terms of the vulnerability of the student population.

6.4. Recommendations

The results of the presented analysis (literature review of the recent studies on underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students; analysis of national policies and HEIs strategic documents; qualitative analysis of student experience of selected underrepresented and vulnerable groups) show that, on one hand, there is awareness of the importance of the social dimension of higher education, and on the other, that the scope of the social dimension is addressed in a rather limited way. This conclusion is indicated by the fact that the focus of existing research and strategic documents and policies is on a relatively small number of vulnerable groups (primarily students of lower socioeconomic status/parental educational status and students with disabilities), while most vulnerable groups are not mentioned in strategic documents and policies and do not benefit from systematic data collection. Ultimately, as the analysed interviews with the students show, this situation is reflected in the student experience of less visible underrepresented and vulnerable groups: although a significant part of the challenges for certain groups is of a material-financial nature, many obstacles faced by students from these groups are still beyond the focus of institutional procedures and practices, which includes difficult access and/or lack of institutional assistance. We therefore consider it important that measures that already exist within the higher education system, and which target the general student population or individual underrepresented and vulnerable groups (e.g. public scholarships for students of lower socioeconomic status) are further developed (e.g. public system of financial support is still insufficient in various segments, see Šćukanec et al., 2015; Rimac et al., 2019) and adapted to other identified vulnerable and underrepresented groups in accordance with their needs. At the same time, it is necessary to identify those aspects of vulnerability and underrepresentation that cannot be addressed by existing measures, and for which new solutions need to be proposed. Accordingly, research findings were used as the basis for recommendations for improving the study conditions of some of the less visible underrepresented and vulnerable groups in Croatian higher education. The presented recommendations refer to the proposals for improving institutional policies at the level of higher education institutions, as well as national policies that pertain to education.

Table 3. Recommendations for improving the study conditions for selected underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students

Underrepresented or vulnerable group	Recommendations
Students with asylum/ refugee status	• Improve availability and accessibility of information related to studies in Croatia • Clearly define HEI enrolment procedures and make them easily accessible (including the necessary level of language skills) • Improve the availability of information on scholarship opportunities • Organize preparatory Croatian language courses at the university level • Ensure multiple daily meals in student restaurants • Introduce a peer counselling system in which students with similar experiences can give advice to other students

Underrepresented or vulnerable group	Recommendations
Students from the Roma minority	• Provide timely information to parents, high school students and teachers, and university students on the possibilities of enrolment in HEIs (e.g. the right to scholarship) and the functioning of the higher education system • Provide some type of additional classes (e.g. private tutoring[17]) for the purpose of academic empowerment and acquisition of knowledge that is expected in higher education (e.g. foreign languages), both during high school and studies • Ensure the right of direct enrolment to more HEIs • Improve the availability of information on scholarship opportunities (e.g. regarding the jurisdiction for different types of scholarships) and dormitory accommodation • Give part-time students the right to dormitory accommodation • Ensure funding for public transportation from the place of study to the place of living (e.g. on the weekends) • Introduce a peer counselling system in which students with similar experiences can give advice to other students • Sensitise members of the Roma community about the benefits of higher education • Encourage educational and other intercultural activities aimed at connecting with the Roma community
LGBTQ+ students	• Establish centres for psychological and counselling support for elementary and high school students so that LGBTQ+ persons would get psychological and counselling support during these levels of education • Establish psychological counselling offices at all HEIs • Encourage the establishment of LGBTQ+ student associations at all HEIs • Encourage the introduction of diversity-sensitive study curricula and sensitize HEI teachers to the problems of LGBTQ+ students • Ensure synergistic activities of educational institutions, competent state institutions and LGBTQ+ associations and the media on the development and implementation of equality policy of LGBTQ+ persons in higher education and education in general

[17] In order to avoid possible stigmatization of members of the Roma minority, these specific forms of supplementary education should be aimed at all high school and university students.

Underrepresented or vulnerable group	Recommendations
Students from alternative care systems	• Introduce high school students and teachers to all important information related to the possibility of enrolling in higher education (e.g. with the right to scholarships and accommodation in dormitories) • During secondary education, provide forms of additional education[18] (e.g. private tutoring) for the purpose of academic empowerment and acquisition of knowledge expected in higher education studies • Establish psychological counselling offices at all HEIs • Periodically organize meetings for students with professional staff at HEIs in order to provide psychological and other forms of support • Introduce a mentoring system by professors or senior students as an additional form of study support • Ensure that students retain student rights in the event that they "lose" a year • Allow students to stay in dormitories throughout the year • Give part-time students the right to dormitory accommodation • Provide transitional financial support and dorm accommodation after graduation • Provide pro-active assistance from various institutions in finding the students' first job
Female students in the technical field	• Organize trainings for primary and secondary school students and teachers with the aim of reducing gender stereotypes related to various occupations and areas of human activity • Provide earlier career guidance and counselling during high school • Organize trainings for professors at HEIs with the aim of reducing gender stereotypes • Introduce disciplinary regulations at HEIs with defined sanctions for professors who behave inappropriately
Male students in the humanities	• Organize trainings for primary and secondary school students and teachers with the aim of reducing gender stereotypes related to various occupations and areas of human activity • Provide earlier career guidance and counselling during high school
Students who are children of Croatian Homeland War veterans	• Establish psychological counselling offices at all HEIs • Ensure the transparency of the criteria for various scholarships, as well as the transparency of scholarship call results • Simplify the administrative requirements for applying for scholarships.

[18] In order to avoid possible stigmatization of young people from the alternative care system, these specific forms of supplementary education should be aimed at all high school students.

Given that some of the recommendations appear for multiple groups, addressing them would improve study conditions for a larger number of vulnerable and underrepresented groups of students. Thus, already at the level of primary or secondary education, it would be advisable to:

- Organize trainings for students and teachers with the aim of respecting and accepting diversity in society and reducing ethnic, gender and other types of prejudice
- Timely acquaint parents, students and teachers with all important information related to the possibilities of enrolment in higher education institutions (e.g. the right to scholarships and accommodation in dormitories) and the functioning of the higher education system
- During secondary education, provide forms of additional teaching[19] (for example, in the form of private tutoring) for the purpose of academic empowerment and acquisition of knowledge that is expected in higher education
- Establish psychological counselling centres for primary and secondary school students

Moreover, at the level of higher education, members of several underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students indicated the need to:

- Encourage and organize different forms of networking among students who have common interests or some other common characteristics (e.g. through a system of "peer" counselling or student associations)
- Improve the availability of information on scholarships (e.g. on jurisdiction of institutions providing different scholarships) and dormitory accommodation
- Reconsider the circumstances and conditions (e.g. study obligation deadlines, adequacy of scholarships with regard to student needs) under which different groups of vulnerable students are provided with the right to scholarships and dormitory accommodation, with regard to specific aspects of vulnerability
- Establish psychological counselling offices at all HEIs

While identifying these recommendations can help set priorities - and thus be useful for decision makers - it does not in any way diminish the importance of implementing all other measures proposed here (Table 3). Moreover, the needs of some of the vulnerable groups discussed here are very specific and cannot be generalized to apply to other students (e.g. students with asylum/refugee status).

[19] In order to avoid possible stigmatization, these specific forms of supplementary education should be aimed at all high school students.

7.

LITERATURE

7. LITERATURE

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8.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Protokol za fokus grupe s podzastupljenim i ranjivim skupinama studenata

Appendix 2. Interview guideline for focus groups with underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students

8. APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Protokol za fokus grupe s podzastupljenim i ranjivim skupinama studenata

O ODABIRU STUDIJA

- Za početak, molim vas recite koji fakultet i smjer studirate i koja ste godina studija?
- Koji je bio glavni razlog da ste se odlučili za vaš fakultet/studij? Je li to što ste *(skupina kojoj studenti pripadaju)* utjecalo na vaš odabir studija?

USPJEŠNOST STUDIRANJA – PREDUVJETI I PREPREKE ZA USPJEH U STUDIJU

OSOBNI PREDUVJETI I PREPREKE ZA STUDIRANJE:

- Što je po vama potrebno da netko bude uspješan u ispunjavanju svojih studentskih obveza *(misli se na individualne/obiteljske značajke studenata)*?
- Što sve otežava studiranje *(npr. teška financijska situacija, niska motivacija za studij, obiteljske obveze)*?
- Smatrate li da je vama kao *(skupina kojoj studenti pripadaju)* teže nego drugim studentima da budete uspješni ? U čemu/po čemu vam je teže, kakva su vam iskustva?
- Postoje li još neke vaše osobne ili možda vaše obiteljske okolnosti koje biste istaknuli da vam otežavaju studiranje?

INSTITUCIJSKI PREDUVJETI I PREPREKE ZA STUDIRANJE:

- Koje su prepreke na razini institucije da budete uspješni u ispunjavanju vaših studentskih obveza *(posebno s obzirom na osobne/obiteljske okolnosti koje ste naveli)*?
- A na razini sustava (npr. MZO, SC, Sveučilište, Veleučiište)?
- Pomaže li vam vaša institucija u prevladavanju ovih prepreka?
- Kakva institucionalna podrška bi vam u tom smislu najviše pomogla? Imate li potrebu za nekim specifičnim resursima na instituciji?
- Ako imate neki problem, kome se možete obratiti na vašoj instituciji? Jeste li zadovoljni tim mogućnostima? Kakva su vaša iskustva? *(Jeste li se već nekome obratili za pomoć/podršku? Jeste li dobili podršku? U čemu se ona sastojala. Jeste li zadovoljni podrškom?)*
- Kako biste ocijenili vašu komunikaciju s profesorima *(jesu li susretljivi, dostupni, uzimaju li u obzir vaše potrebe)*?
- Postoji li podrška među studentima? *(Pomažu li vam kolege/ice na studiju? Oslanjate li se na njih?)* Ako postoji, opišite tu podršku. Ako ne postoji, zašto ne postoji?

USPJEŠNOST I ZADOVOLJSTVO STUDIJEM – OSOBNO

- Jeste li zadovoljni svojim studijem do sada? Što vas veseli, a što brine?
- Očekujete li da ćete uspješno završiti vaš studij? O čemu to najviše ovisi? *(kvaliteta nastave, financije…)* Planirate li nastaviti studij na diplomskoj razini? Ako ne, zašto? A na doktorskoj?
- Jeste li ikada pomislili na odustajanje od studija? Zašto? Odustajanje od ovog studija ili općenito od studiranja?
- Jeste li bili, ili možda planirate, mobilnost u inozemstvo tijekom studija? Ako ne planiraju, zašto?

ŽIVOT TIJEKOM STUDIJA

- Čime ste najzadovoljniji vezano uz život uz studij? Što vas smeta? Što biste voljeli da je drugačije?
- Imate li potporu obitelji/vama bliskih osoba vezano uz studij *(financijsku, emocionalnu…)*?
- Gdje živite tijekom studija *(u studentskom domu…)*? Je li taj smještaj adekvatan vašim potrebama koje imate na studiju?
- Uspijevate li financijski pratiti zahtjeve studentskog života?
- Primate li stipendiju (i koju)? Jeste li zadovoljni mogućnostima za stipendiranje?
- Što vam se čini, kako izgleda vaš studentski život u odnosu na onaj drugih studenata *(slobodno vrijeme, studijske obveze, uvjeti za učenje, itd.)*?

Appendix 2. Interview guideline for focus groups with underrepresented and vulnerable groups of students

ON STUDY SELECTION

- To begin with, please tell us which college are you at, which programme/course are you studying and what year are you in?
- What was the main reason you chose your college/study? Did the fact that you are *(the group to which the students belong)* influence your choice of study?

STUDY SUCCESS - PREREQUISITES AND OBSTACLES TO SUCCESS IN STUDY

PERSONAL PREREQUISITES AND OBSTACLES TO STUDYING:

- According to you, what is it necessary for someone to be successful in fulfilling their student obligations *(referring to students' individual/family characteristics)*?
- What makes it difficult to study *(e.g. difficult financial situation, low motivation to study, family commitments)*?
- Do you think that for you as *(the group to which the students belong)* it is harder than for other students to be successful? In what way is it harder for you, what are your experiences?
- Are there any other personal or family circumstances you would point out that make it difficult for you to study?

INSTITUTIONAL PREREQUISITES AND OBSTACLES TO STUDYING:

- What are the obstacles at the institution level to be successful in fulfilling your student obligations *(especially given the personal/family circumstances you have stated)*?
- And at the system level *(e.g. Ministry of Science and Education, Student Centre, University, Polytechnic/ University of Applied Sciences)*?
- Does your institution help you overcome these obstacles?
- What kind of institutional support would help you most in this regard? Do you need some specific resources at the institution?
- If you have a problem, who can you contact at your institution? Are you satisfied with these options? What are your experiences? *(Have you contacted someone for help/ support yet? Did you get support? What did it consist of? Are you satisfied with the support?)*
- How would you evaluate your communication with professors *(are they helpful, available, do they take your needs into account)*?
- Is there support among students? *(Do your colleagues help you in your study? Do you rely on them?)* If so, please describe this support. If it doesn't exist, why doesn't it exist?

PERFORMANCE AND STUDY SATISFACTION - PERSONAL

- Are you satisfied with your study so far? What makes you happy and what concerns you?
- Do you expect to successfully complete your studies? What does that depend on the most? *(quality of teaching, finances…)* Do you plan to continue your studies at the graduate level? If not, why? And the doctoral one?
- Have you ever considered giving up your studies? Why? Quitting this study or studying in general?
- Have you been on mobility programmes abroad, or maybe plan to, during your studies? If not, why?

LIFE DURING STUDYING

- What makes you most satisfied regarding your life during studying? What bothers you? What do you wish was different?
- Do you have support from your family/close ones regarding your studies *(financial, emotional…)*?
- Where do you live during your studies *(in the dormitory…)*? Is this accommodation adequate for your study needs?
- Do you manage to keep up with the demands of student life financially?
- Do you receive a scholarship (and which one)? Are you satisfied with scholarship opportunities?
- What do you think your student life looks like in comparison to that of other students *(leisure time, study obligations, learning conditions, etc.)*?