

E-QUALITY

Enhancing Quality in Higher Education by Fostering Equity and Social Inclusion

Overview of E-Quality Project Results

Ninoslav Šćukanec, Karin Doolan, Liz Thomas,
Iva Košutić, Valerija Barada



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Authors:

Ninoslav Šćukanec, Karin Doolan, Liz Thomas,
Iva Košutić, Valerija Barada

Editor:

Ninoslav Šćukanec

Editorial board:

Emita Blagdan, Agency for Science and Higher Education, Croatia
Karin Doolan, University of Zadar, Croatia
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Nina Vranešević Marinić, Institute for the Development of Education, Croatia
Vlasta Vizek Vidović, Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, Croatia

Translation from Croatian to English:

Martina Kado

Note: Section 5, 'Quality Label to Enhance Equity and Social Inclusion in Higher Education in Croatia,' was originally written in English by author Liz Thomas

Proofreading:

Anda Bukvić Pažin

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Foreword

Project publication '**Enhancing Quality in Higher Education by Fostering Equity and Social Inclusion**' is the final publication of the project 'E-Quality: Linking quality and social inclusion in higher education in Croatia', presenting an overview of its main results. The main objective of the E-Quality project was to contribute to enhancing equity and social inclusion at higher education institutions (HEIs) in Croatia. For the purposes of this project, equity was defined in line with the Bologna process, namely with the London Communiqué (Ministerial Conference, 2007), which sees equity as a process and a goal according to which the social profile of the student body entering higher education, participating in it and successfully completing it should reflect the diversity of Europe's populations on the whole. Since higher education institutions can foster equity and social inclusion in many different ways, the E-Quality project focussed on identifying to what extent quality assurance processes could contribute to the enhancement of equity and social inclusion at institutions of higher education. The project took into account the fact that Croatia has a developed, functional, high-grade system of quality assurance in higher education, run by the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE). Specific project activities used ASHE's public documents and reports for reference. Also, the project made use of the fact that all higher education institutions in Croatia have internal quality assurance systems in place, which have undergone or will undergo an external assessment process conducted by ASHE. The project team included heads of quality assurance offices at the partner universities, among others.

The first specific objective of the E-Quality project was **to enable higher education institutions (HEIs) to self-assess and independently develop the enhancement of equity and social inclusion**. For this purpose we developed guidelines and scales to assess the achievement levels of HEIs in terms of equity and social inclusion. The second specific objective of the E-Quality project was to develop a quality label proposal that could be awarded to HEIs that are actively involved in fostering equity and social inclusion. **All recommendations and guidelines developed within the E-Quality project are meant to be non-prescriptive** for higher education institutions and elsewhere, and they are not rooted in any legal procedure or other regulations. Institutions of higher education can make independent decisions as to the format or extent to which they wish to apply these recommendations and guidelines. The third specific objective of the project was to produce recommendations to be considered by the Croatian national agency responsible for quality assurance in higher education, ASHE, should it decide to provide additional incentive for HEIs to enhance equity and social inclusion.

The duration of the project was 18 months, from 21 August, 2013, until 21 February, 2015. The project was managed by the Institute for the Development of Education (IDE, Zagreb), while partner institutions comprised: University of Rijeka, University of Zadar, University of Applied Science 'Marko Marulić' in Knin, Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, Croatian Agency for Science and Higher Education, and the Association for Higher Education Development 'Universitas.' Professor Liz Thomas (UK) joined the project as an international expert. The project was co-funded by the European Union, through the European Social Fund (IPA for Human Resources Development Component in Croatia 2007 - 2013; 'Integration of Disadvantaged Groups in Regular Education System').

The key result of the project is the '**E-Quality Edition**', a series of six publications that address quality enhancement and fostering equity and social inclusion in higher education.

The E-Quality project focuses on recognising the potential for change of a higher education institution, and on providing support to HEIs to develop and transform processes that enhance equity and social inclusion. The principles, values and recommendations towards fostering equity and social inclusion developed within this project are non-prescriptive: HEIs and relevant bodies are free to use them voluntarily to monitor and improve the quality of their efforts towards equity and social inclusion in HE. More detailed information about the E-Quality project, as well as electronic versions of the above-mentioned publications are available for download at the project website, www.ipa-equality.eu, or IDE's website, www.iro.hr. They can also be requested at the iro@iro.hr e-mail address.



Introduction

The aim of the publication 'Enhancing Quality in Higher Education by Fostering Equity and Social Inclusion' is to present the main results of the E-Quality project. This is the final of the six publications that were produced within the E-Quality Edition series, providing a short overview of project activities and their results. More comprehensive overviews of particular project activities and their results can be found in the remaining E-Quality Edition publications: each one focuses on one of the major project activities.

This paper begins with an **overview of the development of equity and social inclusion in higher education in Europe and Croatia**, describing their impact on social inclusion, employment, the development of economy and competitiveness and on active citizenship. The first section also elaborates on the links between quality assurance in higher education and equity and social inclusion. This outlines a broader framework, instrumental in understanding these issues.

The second section provides an **overview of the main research findings of 'Institutional Incentives and Obstacles to Study Success: Student Perspective'**, carried out between November 2013 and January 2014 among students at the University of Rijeka, University of Zadar, and the University of Applied Science 'Marko Marulić' in Knin. The research comprised a total of 47 students from vulnerable groups, divided into eight focus groups; the analysis also made use of the data collected within the national Eurostudent survey for Croatia, conducted in 2010. As one of the first project activities to be carried out, this research enabled us to collect and organise data on the needs of vulnerable student groups. It also helped identify institutional extenuating and facilitating factors for successful studying for these groups of students. The data was used to draw up and organise the following project activity, which was to conduct interviews at project partner HEIs.

The following section presents the main findings and recommendations that were formulated as a result of the **interviews carried out with a total of 38 representatives of university governing structures, academic and administrative staff, and students at the University of Rijeka, University of Zadar, and the University of Applied Science 'Marko Marulić' in Knin**. The interviews were carried out in June and July 2014 by Ninoslav Šćukanec from the Institute for the Development of Education, and Karin Doolan from the University of Zadar. Ninoslav Šćukanec compiled the interview notes, which were then analysed by the E-Quality Expert Team. As the final result of these analyses, three separate reports were compiled by the Expert Team, containing recommendations for enhancing equity and social inclusion at E-Quality project partner universities. Members of the Expert Team were Vlasta Vizek Vidović and Iva Košutić (Institute for Social Research in Zagreb), Karin Doolan (University of Zadar), Mladenka Tkalčić and Lovro Liverić (University of Rijeka, members of the Accreditation Council at the Agency for Science and Higher Education), Emita Blagdan and Đurđica Dragojević (Agency for Science and Higher Education), Nina Vranešević Marinić and Ninoslav Šćukanec (Institute for the Development of Education).

In carrying out the above described research, interview series, and report compilation, we referred to the documents used by the Agency for Science and Higher Education in re-accreditation processes, as well as the paper 'Embedding equality and diversity in the curriculum: Self-evaluation framework,' written by Helen May and Liz Thomas for the Higher Education Academy. All these documents were customised to fit the needs of the E-Quality project. Also, the book 'Equity and Quality Assurance: A Marriage of Two Minds,' published in 2010 by UNESCO - International Institute for Educational Planning was found to be of great help in conceptualising specific project activities.

We used the insights gained from the above-mentioned report and interviews conducted during institutional site visits **to develop a tool, which we named Guidelines**, that HEIs can use to critically reflect on the extent to which fostering equity and social inclusion is embedded in their management mechanisms, in study programme design and delivery, and in



achievement assessment for students and staff. Covered in the fourth section of this paper, these Guidelines enable the implementation of different procedures towards enhancing equity and social inclusion at HEIs. It is important to note that the Guidelines are not prescribed by law or any other regulation: they are a tool to be used voluntarily by HEIs and relevant bodies to monitor and improve their efforts towards equity in higher education.

Finally, we found it important to propose the introduction of an innovative mechanism to highlight and reward institutions that have made valuable achievements in enhancing equity and social inclusion. For this reason, the final section of this publication proposes the introduction of a **Quality Label award to HEIs for their efforts in fostering equity**, in order to further encourage and empower them to strengthen these processes within their institutional cultures. This would lead to sharing best practices within, but also between institutions of higher education, in Croatia as well as internationally. This section provides an overview of quality labels used in the HE sector in Europe and gives recommendations towards implementing particular models in the Croatian context. Based on consultations with partner institutions, the final section proposes a potential structure and necessary steps to introduce a Quality Label in Croatia.

Most HEIs would include **students of lower socio-economic status and students with disabilities** into vulnerable groups. The above-mentioned research and interviews conducted enabled the E-Quality project to also identify the following groups of students as vulnerable to education disadvantages: **students over 25 years of age; students who work; students with health problems; students with children; and students who study outside their area of residence**. The terms 'vulnerable students' and 'vulnerable groups of students' used throughout this paper apply to all these groups of students.

Finally, we would also like to refer all those interested in quality enhancement in higher education, as well as in fostering equity and social inclusion, to other E-Quality Edition publications described in the Foreword, which provide more detailed information that could be helpful for further efforts in this area. Should you need assistance or additional information regarding these processes, please feel free to contact the Institute for the Development of Education at iro@iro.hr. They will be happy to provide their expertise and resources.



Summary

Principles and values towards enhancing equity and social inclusion

The results of the research and interviews conducted within the E-Quality project and their corresponding analyses have indicated that the following principles and values might be of help to institutions of higher education that participated in this project (University of Rijeka, University of Zadar, and the University of Applied Science 'Marko Marulić' in Knin) in their efforts towards improving equity and social inclusion.

- **Systematic, long-term approach:** ensuring consistency with comprehensive national strategies and other regulations governing education, but formulating solutions that fit specific characteristics of individual HEIs. Ensuring long-term, sustainable solutions instead of short-term interventions.
- **Integrated, holistic approach:** activities should focus on all students, instead of on vulnerable groups of students only. Enhancing equity and social inclusion is embedded within all functions of the institution and ought to be treated as an ongoing process of quality enhancement (May and Bridger, 2010). Striving to offer different forms of student assistance: academic, financial, legal, psychological, etc.
- **Proactive approach:** activities should encourage students to become actively engaged in the learning and teaching processes. Potential crises should be prevented by developing various institutional solutions and formal procedures. Not all students should be expected to take initiative in safe-guarding their rights. Students who need help the most are very often the last to actively seek assistance.
- **Relevance and practicality:** providing services that respond to actual needs, interests, and future plans of students. Services should be practical and useful: providing information and advice on how to make plans for one's student funding; how to successfully apply for financial aid; how to choose the right study programme and ensure its successful completion, etc.
- **Team work and cooperation:** strengthening cooperation among students and partnership between students and faculty. Encouraging students to self-organise, get involved in student elections, and take part in key representative bodies of their HEIs.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** decision-making should be data- and evidence-based. Institutional research should be encouraged to systematically collect data, produce analyses, and evaluate various aspects of HEI operations. Applying institutional research as a key mechanism for strategic management at HEIs. Being mindful of transparency and visibility of data, analyses, and evaluation results for all HE stakeholders.

Recommendations for enhancing equity and social inclusion at higher education institutions

These are potential areas for additional improvement of equity and social inclusion at HEIs that participated in the E-Quality project:

1. **Commitment of HEI management to equity and social inclusion should be evident from their explicit mention in the institution's mission and vision, as well as in the corresponding strategic goals.** Strategic goals of a HEI should be in line with the funding agreements signed with the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports. Considering the development of a separate institutional policy for equity and social inclusion which would consolidate all mechanisms toward that goal that are currently in place. Commitment to equity and social inclusion must be explicitly communicated by the HEI, internally and outwardly, as well as in key institutional documents: strategic plan, funding agreement, regulations, and website.



2. **Using funding agreements** as effective mechanism of long-term **funding for activities that develop equity and social inclusion**.
3. Enhancing equity and social inclusion within a HEI should become a **priority for all staff**, seeing as it will contribute to an overall improvement in the quality of institutional operations. In order for that to be achieved, it is important to **build staff capacity** for the development of equity and social inclusion.
 - **Boosting individual staff responsibility** and introducing institutional **rewards, recognition, and promotion** to acknowledge staff contribution in enhancing equity and social inclusion.
 - Academic staff should have **continuous access to information, advice, and professional development programmes** on how to improve learning and teaching, how to encourage students to be more proactive, how to ensure their successful progress and completion of studies.
 - **Ensuring consistency and transparency of students' academic achievement assessment procedures**. Assessment criteria should be made known to students in a timely fashion, well in advance. Formal procedures should be in place for students to request and receive explanations regarding their assessment results.
4. **Boosting student capacity** to become actively involved in institutional operations and strengthen their commitment to equity and social inclusion:
 - It is important to **inform students about their expectations, rights, and obligations** at the onset of all study programmes. **Strong mentor support should be ensured** in the form of faculty mentors and student mentors, especially during the first year of study but preferably throughout a student's higher education experience. It is particularly important to mentor first-year students because of their academic socialisation. Students' behaviour should be monitored for early detection of extenuating study circumstances, in order to thwart their potentially negative impact on successful studying.
 - Providing students with **access to information, training and resources** which will motivate them towards active involvement, self-organisation, and effective completion of their obligations. **Providing various incentives for all students** to encourage them to take advantage of available opportunities towards active involvement (rewards, recognition, student project funding, etc.). Helping students understand how their contributions are utilised in improving the work and quality of their HEIs.
5. Initiating or **boosting institutional units, formal institutional procedures and practices which assist vulnerable groups of students** in removing obstacles to their studies (e.g. various student services, such as legal or psychological counselling centres; career advising centres; offices or centres for students with disabilities; various financial aid programmes, etc.).
6. Continuously enhancing quality in higher education through the use of '**quality assurance**,' as well as '**quality enhancement**' procedures. This will reinforce the **links between activities that ensure preconditions** for learning and teaching **and activities that improve the process and teaching and learning outcomes**. It will contribute to a more successful study progress, higher graduation rates and a better outlook in the job market for new graduates. Focussing on the process and outcome means placing emphasis on student-centred learning and teaching.
7. If relevant institutions in Croatian HE decide to introduce an **equity and social inclusion quality label for HEIs**, **it is our recommendation that these institutions apply for recognition and embed this quality label in their long-**



term operations. It would further encourage and empower stakeholders to continue working on improving equity and social inclusion in HE, highlight and reward those who have made valuable achievements and contribute to sharing best practices within their institutions as well as throughout the HE sector, in Croatia and internationally.

8. **Initiating institutional research at HEIs to systematically collect data and analyse** different aspects of institutional operations. Strategic management of HEIs should be informed with reliable data and quality analyses. Consider linking institutional research with quality assurance and enhancement units, which could serve as an institutional framework for institutional research operations. Institutional research should, among other things, collect data on institutional units, study programmes, faculty and students who contribute to the development of equity and social inclusion at HEIs, with the aim of promoting or rewarding them.
9. **Reinforcing faculty-student partnership** in forming institutional policies, procedures and practices that lead to desired, visible change during study cycles. The impact of reform ought to be evaluated regularly. Sharing and visibility of best practices should be ensured.
10. A set of Guidelines was developed within the E-Quality project as a non-prescriptive tool which HEIs can use to critically reflect on the extent to which equity and social inclusion have been embedded in their management mechanisms, study programme design and delivery, and their student and staff achievement assessment procedures. **HEIs are recommended to use these Guidelines to implement different procedures towards enhancing equity and social inclusion** in their operations: various forms of assessment, monitoring, structured data collection tool, or discussion framework. The Guidelines are a flexible tool and can be utilised in different ways:
 - Appropriate for use at institutional level. They can be utilised by central management for the entire scope of institutional operations, or by individual units on the level of faculty, department, or other smaller organisational units.
 - They can be utilised on individual level as well, which means that faculty and administrative staff can use them to improve academic programmes and student assessment. They can be used by students and student organisations if they wish to improve equity within their units or the entire higher education institution.



1. Equity and social inclusion in higher education



1.1

Development of equity and social inclusion in Europe

Over the past 13 years, the issue of equity and social inclusion in higher education has been part of different initiatives within the Bologna Process as well as of those by the European Commission. Owing to the initiative of students, the issue of social dimension in higher education was first addressed in the Prague Communiqué, 2001, as an area deserving more attention within the Bologna Process. The Berlin Communiqué, 2003, and Bergen Communiqué, 2005, stated that raising European competitiveness must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). They pointed out that higher education ought to contribute to strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and gender inequalities. The social dimension was thus embedded in the EHEA, becoming a major precondition for enhancing its attractiveness and competitiveness.

The London Communiqué, 2007, for the first time brought a clear definition and objective for social dimension in higher education, according to which the **social profile of the student body entering higher education, participating in it and completing it at all levels should correspond to the heterogeneous social profile of society at large**. The student body should reflect the diversity of Europe's populations and different measures should ensure that access, successful study progress and graduation depend primarily on students' abilities, not on their personal characteristics or circumstances beyond their direct influence.

The importance of maximising the talents and capacities of all European citizens by **widening participation in higher education**, especially taking into account Europe's aging population, was emphasised in the Leuven Communiqué, 2009. This document stated the commitment of higher education ministers to set measurable targets for increasing participation of vulnerable groups by 2020. **Bologna Process member countries report on their action plans to widen overall participation and increase flexibility in higher education** within their biannual national Bologna Process implementation reports. Since the quality of data submitted in these national reports varies greatly, their applicability is limited.

The Bucharest Communiqué, 2012, stated that **widening access to higher education was a precondition for societal progress and economic development**. Higher education ministers reiterated the importance of adopting national measures for widening overall access to higher education. They also felt that further efforts were needed towards improving the position of vulnerable groups of students. This can be achieved by further developing the social dimension of higher education, reducing inequalities, providing adequate student support services, through counselling and guidance and, by enabling flexible learning paths, including recognition of prior learning.

The Bologna Process Working Group for the Social Dimension focuses on organisation of data and developing indicators to measure progress in developing social dimension in higher education. Since 2013, member countries of the Bologna Process have worked on **systematic and transparent collection of measures that improve policies and practices related to enhancing the social dimension in higher education**. All measures are presented and available at the *Peer Learning for the Social Dimension* (PL4SD) project website, www.pl4sd.eu. Sharing best practices enables the EHEA member countries to exchange knowledge and experience in the field of social dimension in higher education, to compare and assess different approaches in policy design, and to identify best practices for problem solving. In addition, a major contribution to the systematic data collection on the socio-economic characteristics of students is the **Eurostudent survey** (www.eurostudent.eu), conducted every four years in over 25 the EHEA member countries, including Croatia.



On the EU level, one of the most prominent mechanisms for equity enhancement is the **'ET 2020' strategy**. This document was produced by the Council of the European Union in 2009 as a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training up to the year 2020. Among the four main strategic objectives of this framework is the promotion of equity, social cohesion and active citizenship. Education and training policies should enable quality education for all citizens. In this document, equity is related to the acquisition of knowledge, skills and competences necessary for finding employment, social inclusion, active citizenship and personal fulfilment.

1.2

Development of equity and social inclusion in Croatia

Systematic monitoring of equity and social inclusion in Croatia began when the country **joined the Eurostudent survey** for the first time **in 2010**. The National EUROSTUDENT Survey Report for Croatia was published in 2011 (Farnell et al, 2011), presenting for the first time data on the socio-economic characteristics of student life in Croatia. Since the Eurostudent survey is also implemented in 25 other European countries, this was the first time that data on Croatia was compared to that on other participating countries in the Europe-wide report (Orr et al, 2010). Croatia participated in the following Eurostudent survey cycle as well, which was carried out in 2014, while the national report was published in June 2015. This enabled data comparison of socio-economic characteristics of students in Croatia between 2010 and 2014 on a national level, as well as the assessment of progress made in particular areas.

As a result of the **TEMPUS project 'ACCESS: Towards Equitable and Transparent Access to Higher Education in Croatia'**, led by the Institute for the Development of Education (IDE) in 2010–2013, with the participation of all Croatian public higher education institutions, two kinds of recommendations were produced: to reform the funding of HEIs, and to reform the system of student financial aid (student standard). These recommendations are also a contribution to equity enhancement, since the research and comparative analyses used to collect the data informing the recommendations, investigated the impact of funding policy on equity and vulnerable groups of students. More information is available at the project website, www.tempus-access.info.

An important step forward in linking funding and equity was made with the initiation of the pilot funding agreements scheme, which the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education, and Sports (MSES) signed with all public HEIs in 2013 and 2014. According to these agreements, the availability of additional funding is contingent on meeting the objectives selected by HEIs. A number of objectives that MSES made available for selection were related to enhancing equity and social inclusion:

- Enabling access and fostering retention for students from lower socio-economic status groups and disabled students;
- Enabling access and assuring the quality of study for students older than 25 years of age;
- Increasing the impact using student evaluations of the teaching process and teaching staff;
- Increasing the quality of student services;
- Increasing cooperation between students and governing structures of HEIs;
- Increasing cooperation with the local community and economy in areas of interest to students, study



programmes, and the teaching process;

- Equalising positions of students studying at a particular institution with regard to student participation in their costs of study.

The E-Quality project has identified these funding agreements as the main mechanism currently in place for enhancing equity and social inclusion at Croatian HEIs.

Finally, the main developmental goals listed in the **Strategy for Education, Science and Technology, adopted by the Croatian Parliament in 2014**, included student standard reform with the aim of achieving greater equity in higher education. The Strategy states that higher education must be available to all according to their abilities. There are plans to design a programme towards enhancing the social dimension of studying, including an analysis of access and successful completion for vulnerable groups of students. Croatia intends to develop a systematic policy of inclusion of students from underrepresented groups, with special emphasis on ensuring minimal standards of accessibility for students with disabilities.

1.3

Terminology

The Bologna Process and EU policies situate **higher education in a wider social context, demonstrating its significant impact on social inclusion, employment, economic development and competitiveness, and active citizenship**. Key processes within the EHEA and the EU have identified the impact of the social dimension of higher education on the following:

- **Social justice** – success in education must not depend on personal characteristics and circumstances beyond the direct control of an individual. This includes the individual's background, socio-economic characteristics, gender, race, ethnicity, etc. The risk of non-accession and non-completion in higher education is linked with difficulties in social inclusion.
- **Economic development** – widening access to higher education for vulnerable groups of students maximises the utilisation and development of human potential, which contributes to competitiveness and knowledge-based economic development.
- **Societal development** – increasing the share of individuals with higher education degrees in the wider population, especially by including vulnerable groups and ensuring successful completion of their studies, contributes to the overall development of a society characterised by a greater degree of social cohesion and mutual trust, higher tax revenues, more active participation in political life and community development, and better overall health of population.

The terminology used in emphasising the importance of widening access and enabling study completion free from obstacles related to personal and external circumstances beyond the direct control of the individual is **not uniform and consistent on the European level: different terms are used, such as social dimension, widening participation, widening access, equity and social inclusion**. They share the above-mentioned characteristic that entering higher education and



completion thereof must not depend on students' characteristics that are beyond their direct control. **The E-Quality project has decided to adopt the terms *equity and social inclusion***, which it defines in line with the London Communiqué, 2007: the social profile of the student body entering higher education, participating in it and successfully completing it should reflect the diversity of social profile in overall population.

Broadly speaking, equity and social inclusion are linked with issues of successful study and drop-out, with study programme design and delivery, and with student academic achievement assessment. They are also connected with involving students in all key aspects of higher education institution operations, as well as with involving staff, who should actively cooperate with students and other key stakeholders in the community served by the higher education institution. Taking into account Croatia's negative demographics, widening access to studying and increasing rates of graduation are particularly important if the higher education sector is to maintain its current size. Ideally, **equity and social inclusion considerations ought to be embedded in almost all higher education institution functions and treated as a continuous process of quality enhancement** (May and Bridger, 2010).

1.4

Link between equity and social inclusion, and quality assurance in higher education

International experience

According to Martin (2010), fostering equity and social inclusion on the level of (higher education) institutions can be improved:

- If there is a national strategy or national programme in place, aimed at enhancing equity and social inclusion in higher education;
- If fostering equity and social inclusion is embedded in the national higher education quality assurance model;
- If there are institutional policies and mechanisms explicitly aimed at enhancing equity and social inclusion; and by

a. **National strategy or national programme** to enhance equity and social inclusion in higher education

If the national higher education and science development strategy has clear goals aimed at enhancing equity and social inclusion, this will encourage HEIs to include these issues in their institutional strategies and policies. The existence of additional national incentives, such as special programmes or funding agreements more specifically focussed on equity enhancement, could be a further encouragement. Linking programmes or funding agreements with different forms of institution funding would yield even better results.



b. National higher education quality assurance model fostering equity and social inclusion

National strategies, programmes, and funding agreements can contribute to embedding the fostering of equity and social inclusion into the national quality assurance model. A national quality assurance model implies a coherent set of standards and criteria that HEIs are supposed to meet through different procedures of external evaluation. If these standards and criteria, as well as external evaluation procedures, include elements of equity and social inclusion, a framework is set up towards continuously motivating HEIs to enhance equity and social inclusion. Since a quality assurance model most often includes self-evaluation mechanisms for HEIs, external independent assessment, and subsequent monitoring and reporting, it can ensure in the long run that HEIs do foster equity and social inclusion through different institutional mechanisms and practices.

c. Institutional policies and mechanisms explicitly aimed at enhancing equity and social inclusion

If the national strategic framework and quality assurance model are focussed on enhancing equity and social inclusion, HEIs will be encouraged to develop different mechanisms for long-term development in these areas. This will also impact effective monitoring of progress in developing equity and social inclusion. Performance-based funding and different forms of rewarding equity efforts can be a further incentive for institutions. It is important to ensure that HEIs are autonomous in deciding on how they plan to achieve the nationally set strategic goals.

If HEIs were to identify their internal quality systems as desirable and effective mechanisms towards enabling continuous monitoring and assessment of equity- and social inclusion-enhancing practices, this would ensure for equity enhancement to become an integral part of improving overall quality of a HEI's operations. This would widen the scope of equity enhancement from being focussed on providing specific measures targeted at particular vulnerable groups to involving students, academic and administrative staff in fostering equity and social inclusion through mutual cooperation, in all institutional aspects (May and Bridger, 2010).

Croatian experience

By adopting a new Strategy for Education, Science and Technology in 2014, which included improving the social dimension of higher education as a major strategic goal, Croatia has ensured a stimulating national strategic framework towards enhancing equity and social inclusion in higher education. In line with the 2009 legislation on quality assurance in science and higher education, different procedures of external quality assessment in HE were initiated through the work of the relevant Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE): initial accreditation and re-accreditation; audit; thematic evaluation, etc. A lot has been done to initiate the system of quality assurance in higher education. The year 2015 will see the completion of the first cycle of re-accreditation, which collected much valuable data and examples from practice. Thus, the national quality assurance model as well, together with the new higher education and science development strategy, opens favourable opportunities for further enhancement of equity and social inclusion in higher education and science during the following five-year cycle through assessment procedures carried out by ASHE.



2. Challenges for equity and social inclusion: the perspective of vulnerable student groups



2.1

About the research

The activities of the E-Quality project included the research 'Institutional Incentives and Obstacles to Study Success: Student Perspective', the aim of which was to identify institutional obstacles and incentives for successful studying for groups of students vulnerable to education disadvantages. This research should serve as an empirical starting point for developing quality assurance procedures to evaluate social inclusiveness of higher education institutions. This will also link the quality of HEIs with the issues of social inequality in education.

The conceptual starting point for the research was the idea of *institutional habitus*, which comprises institutional characteristics that mitigate the influence of an individual's social position on their success in education, as well as those that reinforce the link between an individual's social position and education success (McDonough, 1996, Reay et al, 2001, 2005). We focused on institutional characteristics which, especially when compounded with biographical characteristics (background and personal characteristics of students), might serve as (counter-) incentives for successful studying. These institutional characteristics were identified according to institutional habitus dimensions as defined by Reay et al (2001): organisational practices; cultural and expressive characteristics; and curriculum offer.

The project research was carried out between November 2013 and January 2014 at three Croatian institutions of higher education: University of Rijeka, University of Zadar, and University of Applied Science 'Marko Marulić' in Knin. Eight focus groups were held, as well as two interviews with two participants, two interviews with one participant each, while four interviews used written communication. The research involved a total of 47 participants from the following groups vulnerable to education disadvantages: students who work; students who study outside of their place of residence; student parents; those who did not pursue higher education immediately after graduating from secondary school; those with lower socio-economic backgrounds; and students with disabilities. Although the research was initially planned for focus groups only, the diversity of research methods indicated that access to target groups was somewhat difficult and that there were difficulties in organising the field work part of the research. In order to present the social profile of students at participating institutions, our research also made use of quantitative results of the Eurostudent survey from 2010.

The complete report on this project's research is available as a separate E-Quality Edition publication (in Croatian only), and can be downloaded from the project website, www.ipa-equality.eu, or from IDE's website, www.iro.hr:

- Doolan, K., Košutić, I. and Barada, V. (2015). Institutional Incentives and Obstacles to Study Success: Student Perspective (Research Report). Zagreb: Institute for the Development of Education.



2.2

Research results

Research results provide an outline of the higher education experience of students from vulnerable groups, with special emphasis on what these students see as obstacles to their successful study, and on the institutional characteristics which facilitate, or extenuate, their success.

- According to research participants, study success is determined by regular attendance, but also by the entire studying experience: students value not only the outcomes, but the processes of studying as well. Although they do find advancing into higher years of study extremely important, they do not feel that marks received are necessarily a good indicator of their knowledge. When it came to study failures, participants were most likely to hold themselves responsible.
- All research participants stated the importance of funding resources as a factor in successful studying. Identifying a number of expenses such as tuition fees, administrative costs, photocopying costs, field work and private tutoring, the students state that they sometimes find it difficult, as do their colleagues, to cover all their costs.
- The preferred option for study materials was the electronic format, as it did not require photocopying or purchase costs.
- Some of the students find employment throughout the semester or during the tourist season in order to cover their study costs. Since the necessity of employment during study also determines the type of study programme in some cases, it is not rare for students who are forced to work to choose a less time-consuming type of study programme, because it allows them to work and study at the same time.
- Health problems also influence the study experience, regardless of whether they affect the students themselves or a family member. Research participants reported encountering different obstacles due to different health conditions or acute illness. Some have to attend physical therapy, some find it hard to sit in classes all day, some need visual aids for text materials, while others find it difficult to reach faculty buildings that are located elsewhere. Students resolve all of these challenges either with the help of their parents, or through personal contact with fellow students, professors, and administrative staff. This personal contact was particularly singled out and exceptionally valued; however, it must be said that these supportive relations compensate for institutional shortfalls.
- Student - mothers use similar strategies. They reach out to their families and fellow students first, and only then to faculty and administrative staff, because they do not want to 'use their child as an excuse.' Although female participants mostly reported positive experiences in tackling immediate obstacles, they still often face giving up their student obligations when family and parenting requirements get in the way.
- Students who commute daily from outside of town or county face a double challenge: substantial travel costs make it impossible for them to attend all classes, and they have less time to study. These students also stated that they sometimes feel exhausted after their commute, which makes studying more difficult.
- Class schedule was deemed fairly demanding, as it often spanned the entire day and was irregular. Also, mandatory attendance, which has been insisted upon since the implementation of the Bologna Process, was considered unnecessary. These extenuating circumstances particularly affect students who have to balance



their study obligations with employment, students with physical disabilities who might find daily attendance exhausting, but also those who depend on organised transportation for their arrival and return from class, student parents whose care-giving suffers with poor class schedule, those with several hour commutes, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who incur food and drink costs due to 'breaks' between classes.

- Participants have mostly positive relations with their fellow students. Although certain groups find it more difficult to establish a more lasting contact with their colleagues, support occurs in studying together or sharing materials or information, and sometimes even in concrete situations like babysitting.
- According to participants, teaching staff respond differently to the specific needs of students: while some are allowed to miss more classes or adapt their schedules, other faculty members do not allow such options. Students often find it embarrassing to seek understanding from faculty for their specific circumstances.
- Students participating in focus groups and interviews mentioned the following as potential sources of financial aid: government, county, municipality, city, university, faculty, and different foundations. They did, however, face problems in receiving financial aid due to a lack of scholarships, the grade-point average as criterion, corruption, as well as small amounts, irregular payments, and life circumstances not being taken into account when awarding scholarships.
- Participants were poorly informed on student mobility opportunities. Also, students tend to decide against participating in mobility programmes due to their financial situation, other obligations or lack of self-confidence.
- With regard to accommodation, the universities in Rijeka and Zadar have student accommodation, whereas student housing was in the process of being built in Knin. The proportion of students living in student housing was low at both universities, which students highlighted as a problem. All three participating institutions have student restaurants, which were criticised by students for their prices as well as food quality.
- Social justice topics are covered in class depending on the study programme, while students reckon that they should be covered in all study programmes. Suggestions that were made during the research refer to including social justice content in courses, encouraging cooperation among students, e.g. through team work, and humanitarian activities.

2.3

Proposals to improve institutional practice

According to the opinions and experience of students who participated in this research, higher education institutions could do more to encourage successful studying among their students. Table 1 lists extenuating and facilitating factors which students identified as crucial to their study success. Students from vulnerable groups made suggestions as to how institutional practices could be improved (Table 2). Their recommendations for improvement concern the following areas: providing timely information; class schedule and mandatory attendance; equipment; taking exams and assessment; interaction with academic staff; social life; support services; financial aid; accommodation; student meals; administrative staff; user-friendly institutional facilities; and transportation. The proposals that resulted from this research could contribute to improving and creating institutional practices towards enhancing and ensuring the social dimension in higher education, thereby responding to the needs of groups most vulnerable to disadvantages in education.



Table 1. Extenuating and facilitating institutional factors for successful studying

Institutional factors that <i>extenuate</i> study success	Institutional factors that <i>facilitate</i> study success
Poor scheduling and mandatory class attendance	Good scheduling and time-management flexibility
Shortage of relevant study materials and equipment (including equipment for disabled students)	Access to relevant study materials and equipment
Large study groups	Small study groups
Subjectivity in assessment	The highest possible degree of objectivity in assessment
Poor relations with academic and administrative staff	Good relations with academic and administrative staff
No institutional encouragement towards solidarity and cooperation among students	Institutional encouragement of good relations and solidarity among students
Insufficient support services	Sufficient support services
Insufficient number and amount of scholarships	Sufficient number and amount of scholarships
Institutional facilities do not take into account the needs of different groups of students: facilities inadequate for students with disabilities; lack of childcare services for student parents	Institutional facilities adapted to the needs of different groups of students

Table 2. Suggestions towards institutional fostering of study success

Area	Suggestions	Specific importance for vulnerable groups of students
Information provision	Have an orientation meeting at the onset of study programme, covering important information (e.g. what is the role of student administration office; what is the student union).	Receiving timely information regarding cancelled classes or schedule changes is important for student travellers, who cannot make travel arrangements as quickly as those who live close to their place of study.
	Provide timely information regarding studies (e.g. cancellation of classes; scheduling changes; scholarship options; mobility opportunities).	Scholarship information is important for students experiencing financial difficulties.
Class schedule and mandatory attendance	Address class overlaps and long breaks in daily class schedule. Treat mandatory attendance with more flexibility.	Flexibility regarding mandatory class attendance is important for students who work, student parents, and students with disabilities.
Equipment	Provide adequate study materials and equipment for laboratories and libraries; enable access to online journal databases and books in Braille script; introduce desks for students with disabilities, electronic magnifier, more computer stations; start a childcare service for student parents.	Institutional provision/procurement of teaching materials is important for students experiencing financial difficulties. Providing special equipment is important for students with disabilities.
		Childcare services are important for student parents.



Taking exams and assessment	Introduce clear criteria, a just assessment system, and adaptable examination procedures for students with disabilities.	It is important for students with disabilities to be allowed more time for written exams or to have adaptable forms of examination (written or oral), depending on their disability.
Academic staff	Allow irregular attendance for vulnerable students; have understanding for their specific circumstances. Implement professional education programmes for staff to provide support for students with disabilities and students from other vulnerable groups. Introduce a mentorship programme, encourage open communication, and be willing to provide assistance.	It is important for students who work, student parents, students with disabilities, those with financial difficulties and inadequate prior education to receive understanding from their teaching staff.
Social life	Organise social events, provide space for student interaction.	Social integration encouragement is particularly important for mature students and students with disabilities.
Support services	Introduce psychological and legal counselling, career advising services, and an office for students with disabilities. Provide personal teaching assistants in class.	Psychological counselling is important for students with mental challenges that impair their study. Personal teaching assistants are important for students with disabilities.
Financial aid	Enable lower tuition fees for students from vulnerable groups, higher scholarship amounts, monetary awards, transportation subsidies, and different opportunities for paid work within the higher education institution.	Scholarships are extremely important for students experiencing financial difficulties.
Accommodation	Increase student housing capacities and adapt accommodation facilities for students with disabilities.	Student housing is important for students with financial difficulties. Adapted student housing is important for students with disabilities.
Student meals	Introduce higher quality meals and ensure affordable pricing.	Availability of affordable meals is important for students with financial difficulties.
Administrative staff	Improve student administration office work and have friendlier administrative staff.	No particular vulnerable group importance was identified, as this issue is important for all students.
User-friendly facilities and transportation	Enable accessibility for students with disabilities (including classrooms and sanitary facilities). Find transportation solutions from home to institution for students with severe mobility issues.	User-friendly facilities and organised transportation are important for students with disabilities.



**3. Challenges for equity
and social inclusion:
institutional perspective**



3.1

Main findings

The E-Quality project also involved interviews with representatives of governing structures, teaching and administrative staff, and students at the University of Rijeka, University of Zadar, and the University of Applied Science 'Marko Marulić' in Knin, conducted in June and July 2014. Three reports were produced as a result, presenting findings and recommendations to improve equity and social inclusion at participating institutions. The main findings of these reports can be grouped as follows:

1. Despite their general commitment to developing equity and social inclusion by governing structures, teaching, and administrative staff, **key documents of higher education institutions do not explicitly state or consolidate information that would define equity and social inclusion.** At the moment, there are no institutional policies or relevant institution bodies in place that would manage and evaluate the number of equity-developing programmes and activities implemented by higher education institutions.
2. **Funding agreements** between HEIs and the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education, and Sports (MSES) form the **main mechanism for institutional enhancement of equity and social inclusion.** They state clear objectives, target groups, and activities directly aimed at enhancing equity. Since these funding agreements are linked to MSES funding, which is performance-based, different performance evaluation mechanisms and corresponding indicators have been developed.
3. **The main institutional mechanisms** introduced towards providing **continuous support for students from vulnerable groups are student counselling services and different programmes of student financial aid.** Counselling services mostly offer psychological and legal advising, as well as assistance for students with disabilities. The range of services provided by such counselling centres and the continuity of their work differ greatly among institutions. The most common forms of financial aid are scholarships for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and for students with disabilities.
4. Higher education institutions have not systematically resolved **the issue of professional staff development,** especially teaching staff, which includes the issue of professional development related to equity enhancement as well. There is no systematic monitoring of individual staff achievements and their impact on equity fostering. The faculty try to provide assistance for students in different ways, however, that happens only after the issues of students from vulnerable groups gain visibility or when it is pointed out by students themselves.
5. Higher education institutions have not developed **standardised data collection procedures¹** in order to continuously evaluate the effectiveness and impact of equity enhancement practices. **Student surveys** are usually the only mechanism used to regularly evaluate the quality of teaching, however, students are for the most part not informed about survey results and ways they are utilised to improve the teaching process.

The following sections will present more detailed analyses of equity and social inclusion for every higher education institution that participated in the E-Quality project. The analysis covers advantages and disadvantages identified,

¹ Examples of potential standardised data collection procedures include: creating a student social profile e-database; systematic data collection on academic success and progress of students by year; data collection on graduation and drop-out rates; data collection on staff achievements in enhancing equity, to be used as a basis for rewards and promotions, etc.



followed by recommendations towards improvement for each institution. A separate publication within the E-Quality Edition containing comprehensive reports for all three participating institutions is available (in Croatian only) at the project website, www.ipa-equality.eu, or at IDE's website, www.iro.hr:

- Šćukanec, N. (2015). Reports on Equity and Social Inclusion at the University of Rijeka, University of Zadar, and University of Applied Science 'Marko Marulić' in Knin (E-Quality Project Findings and Recommendations). Zagreb: Institute for the Development of Education.

3.2

University of Rijeka: advantages, disadvantages, and recommendations towards improving equity and social inclusion

Advantages

- It is commendable that the University of Rijeka recognised the importance of equity and social inclusion for its further development in the 2014-2020 Strategy for Development. It is important that the understanding of equity and social inclusion is not limited to a specific group of vulnerable students and corresponding time-determined policies, but embedded in all University functions and treated as an ongoing quality enhancement process².
- It is an advantage that the University recognised its Funding Agreement as a functional mechanism for equity enhancement. Objectives selected within the Funding Agreement clearly define vulnerable target groups and activities on which the University will focus for the duration of this Agreement. The University initiated performance-based project funding linked to Funding Agreement objectives, which is the best practice example towards systematic enhancement of equity and social inclusion.
- Students and the faculty pointed out that the governing structures of the University were committed and active in promoting equity and social inclusion, and that there was institution-wide consensus regarding the importance of an equity policy. There are many procedures and mechanisms in place to that effect, they stated. A Student Counselling Centre was established during the mandate of the current University administration, comprising for the first time an Office for Disabled Students and Legal Counselling Services, in addition to the Psychological Counselling Services and Career Office, which were already in place. Also, a number of scholarship programmes was initiated, focusing on higher education access and its successful completion by students from vulnerable groups.
- Institutional policies, procedures, and practices enable and encourage continuous involvement of students in all key aspects of University operations. Students consider themselves represented in all University bodies

² This approach to equity is explained in more detail in May and Bridger (2010).



relevant to their interests and needs. Moreover, they pointed out that their representation was not merely formal (because it is prescribed by University regulations), but also the result of institutional awareness that the opinions and perspective of students are necessary for certain processes to be successful.

- There is successful cooperation between different services, both on the levels of central administration and individual units. University management highlighted the existence of an expert body, the Expert Council of the Centre for Studies and Students, serving as a network of sorts, used to successfully exchange information and coordinate teaching- and student-related activities among all University units as well as between the units and central administration. The Council consists of all vice-deans in charge of academic and student affairs, and seven other members appointed from different scientific fields by the University Senate, which ensures the representation of interests of all key stakeholders within the University. As a result, different policies and procedures are harmonised, duplication is avoided, and actual needs of both students and faculty are addressed.

Disadvantages

- The Strategy does not offer unified, consolidated information on what equity and social inclusion mean, what they consist of, or why they are important for University development. In our opinion, clarification would enable different stakeholders within the numerous university communities, with their multiple units/faculties, to share a uniform interpretation of equity policy. Without it, stakeholders might (a) not know what equity and social inclusion are and how they are defined in major national (Croatian Strategy for Education, Science and Technology) and international documents (Ministerial Communiqués from Bologna conferences); (b) not understand the links and mutual influences between equity policy and other university policies; or (c) have different interpretations of what equity is and what its purpose is for the University and its units. All these factors together might dampen effectiveness and efficiency in achieving specific Strategy objectives related to equity and social inclusion.
- Students are seldom involved in study programme design; there are a lot more mechanisms in place for involving students in study programme delivery.
- The University regularly surveys students for teaching process evaluations. According to students, most of them unfortunately do not receive feedback on how their evaluations are utilised to improve the quality of the teaching process.
- Students' responses indicated that modes of academic assessment were not standardised and defined throughout university units and study programmes.
- Student elections turnout is poor. Being the representative student body, the Student Union tries to provide additional information and motivation for students to get involved; however, these processes are still not producing satisfactory results.
- Students particularly highlighted issues regarding university student housing criteria. The insufficient capacity of current student accommodation is one issue, which is being addressed by constructing new student housing buildings on new campus grounds. A much bigger issue, however, is that of problematic criteria for assigning university student accommodation. Namely, the majority of students are guaranteed direct enrolment in student housing based on, according to students, special entitlements as children of war veterans or low socio-economic status as verified by the tax administration. Since the majority of students directly receive student accommodation based on special status, there is virtually no opportunity for any other group to secure student housing.



Recommendations towards improving equity and social inclusion

Institution management

- We propose that the University consider adopting a separate policy for equity and social inclusion, as well as a separate document which would define the role of equity and consolidate all University mechanisms for enhancement that are already in place, on the University level as well as at all individual units.
- Despite the efforts of governing structures towards strengthening institutional and personal responsibilities in developing equity, the project Expert Team noted during interviews with stakeholders that university employees, such as the faculty, have different ideas of what equity is and of the extent to which the University and its units encourage policy development in this area. We recommend that equity and social inclusion information be included in professional development programmes for University employees, and that all staff be required to take these courses.

Developing policies and procedures towards enhancing equity and social inclusion

- If systematic and long-term enhancement of equity and social inclusion policy is the University's strategic decision, we recommend drafting a plan that would clearly define which key documents and regulations will be revised by the University and its units, and in what time frame, with the aim of embedding elements to ensure fostering of equity and social inclusion. We also propose referring to the report on E-Quality research findings (available in Croatian only), 'Institutional Incentives and Obstacles to Study Success: Student Perspective.' Chapter '3.6. Suggestions towards Institutional Incentives for Successful Studying' offers concrete proposals as to how the University could boost equity development.
- Create the best practice exchange system for positive instances of equity enhancement within the University, as well as all its individual units.
- Ensure and develop institutional mechanisms and practices to enable early identification of problems faced by students from vulnerable groups, and use them for targeting further activities. Examples of potential institutional mechanisms and practices include: improving the work of student services such as the Student Counselling Centre, peer support programme, funding student projects that focus on equity development, strengthening the role of the Student Union and other student associations, etc.
- We recommend that the University develop standardised procedures for data collection in order to continuously evaluate and monitor the effectiveness and impact of practices contributing to equity-related objectives. Implementing activities that enhance equity without ensuring that there are also evaluation mechanisms in place will not ensure consistency in achieving defined strategic and programme objectives. We recommend that these procedures be linked with evaluating the achievement of objectives listed in the University's Strategy and Funding Agreement. We also recommend that the University entrusts an existing or new university-level body with the responsibility of monitoring the achievement of equity policy objectives as a separate activity.



Study programme design

- It is important to continuously encourage the involvement of different stakeholders in curriculum and evaluation in order to ensure the representation of different interests and needs (students, alumni, representatives of civil society organisations, employers' representatives, local community, etc.)
- The project Expert Team considers it important to enable student involvement not only in the study programme delivery phase, but also during study programme design, in order to make certain that the needs of different groups of students are met.
- Since part-time students face the same rules and obligations as full-time students, it is important that the University explore legal and other mechanisms to initiate study programmes that are adapted to the needs of part-time students (provide more time for completion of studies and fulfilment of student obligations, etc.)
- Teaching staff should have continuous access to information, advice, and training in order to be able to design inclusive curricula. Study programmes should be continuously evaluated to identify and prevent potential negative impact on particular groups of students.

Study programme delivery

- It is important to communicate their rights and obligations to students as an organised activity at the onset of all study programmes. Within this activity, it is important that students are informed about the mechanisms they can utilise to communicate their extenuating circumstances and seek possible solutions. This will enable timely identification and address of problems encountered by vulnerable groups. It is especially important to provide strong faculty mentor support during the first year of study. Monitoring first-year students is especially important for their academic socialisation. Advanced years of study will not require the same intensity of mentor support, thus one or two faculty mentors could be in charge of an entire study group.

Academic assessment and feedback

- We recommend that the University be mindful that academic assessment processes are standardised among departments and units, that the processes are transparent, that there are clear criteria on how final course marks are arrived at, and that students are informed thereof well in advance.

Student involvement

- The University is recommended to conduct regular evaluations of institutional policies, procedures, and practices that enable student involvement in all key aspects of University and individual unit operations. Based on data collected, needs identified, and analyses conducted, streamline further activities towards student involvement. Help students understand how they can get involved in institutional processes and how their contributions so far are utilised to improve the work of the University and its units.
- It is commendable that the University has started a wide array of programmes and activities towards fostering equity and social inclusion. It is our recommendation that the University place more emphasis on making all these programmes and activities more visible in order to maximise their efficiency. Also, we recommend that the University include sexual minorities (LGBT) and ethnic minorities among vulnerable groups of students.
- The University is recommended to provide students with access to information, training, and resources to encourage them to become involved, self-organised, and effective in fulfilling their obligations. Provide students with different incentives towards utilising opportunities for active involvement (awards, recognition, free access to particular resources, student project funding, EU project involvement, etc.).



Staff involvement

- We recommend that the University introduce a system for monitoring and evaluating individual achievements of university employees (teaching and administrative staff) towards fostering equity and social inclusion within the University. Introducing institutional awards, recognition, and promotion to recognise staff contribution (teaching and administrative) to equity enhancement could motivate employees to be more proactive, which would in turn boost a quality culture that recognises the importance of equity and social inclusion.

Study resources, space, and environment

- Revise criteria for university student housing assignments. Increase accommodation capacities by building new student housing within a short-term time frame.

3.3

University of Zadar: advantages, disadvantages, and recommendations towards improving equity and social inclusion

Advantages

- The University's Funding Agreement with the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education, and Sports is a very good mechanism for enhancing equity and social inclusion, since the University selected a number of important objectives that directly contribute to equity enhancement.
- The University has established a Scholarship Fund as an institutional mechanism for systematic collection of funds to assist vulnerable groups of students. A major advantage of the Fund is that funds are raised from different sources and different stakeholders: the University's own income, Funding Agreement funds, commercial bank donations, etc.
- A particularly valuable example of best practice is the University's student social profile database. Data is collected at enrolment, using a separate form for this purpose. The database will enable the University to initiate activities that focus on meeting the actual needs of identified vulnerable groups³.
- Another best practice example is the University's introduction of enrolment quotas for students over 25 years of age, thereby making access to higher education easier for this vulnerable group. The University also established a Committee for Students with Disabilities, which should provide assistance in facilitating study access for disabled persons.

³ This publication uses the term 'vulnerable groups of students' and 'vulnerable students' to include: students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds; students with disabilities; students over 25 years of age; students with full-time employment; students with health problems; student parents; and students who live outside their place of study.



- The University implements a Professional Development Programme for academic staff, which covers the content related to the development and fostering of equity and social inclusion.
- The University makes a point of including representatives from the local social and economic communities in University work, and it has formed different organisational units to that effect: the University Council; the Alumni Club; engaging local community representatives in different councils, committees, etc. The University and the local community apply for and implement joint projects, as well as organise public events together. These are instances of inclusive University operations, which enable catering to the needs of a wide group of stakeholders, including vulnerable groups of students.
- The University implements some best practices in terms of readiness to adapt study programmes to prior education levels of students (gymnasium programmes, vocational secondary school programmes): health studies; the Linguistics department, etc.

Disadvantages

- Students pointed out that there was a substantial discrepancy between university departments in terms of assessment procedures, the transparency of assessment procedures, clearly defined criteria for the final mark, and how well informed students are in advance – certain departments have very high standards in this respect, but according to students, there are also departments with serious problems in achieving minimum standards.
- The University regularly conducts student evaluations on the quality of the teaching process; however, students state that improvement is needed in activities used to inform students and staff on survey results and how they are utilised towards improving the teaching process.
- There is no system in place to monitor or evaluate individual achievements of University employees (teaching and administrative staff) and their impact on fostering equity at the University. For this reason, there is no systematic way for employees (teaching and administrative staff) with specific expertise in the area of equity and social inclusion to promote, encourage, and advise others on how to embed equity in university work.

Recommendations towards improving equity and social inclusion

Institution management

- If the University intends to develop and reinforce a policy of equity and social inclusion, it is our recommendation that the University explicitly defines in the University Strategy how it sees these issues, especially in its mission, vision, and key strategic objectives. This will boost management mechanisms for implementing and evaluating Strategy objectives related to equity enhancement. We recommend that the Strategy contains direct, unambiguous goals related to equity, as is already the case with the general and specific objectives of the University's Funding Agreement, which is clearly streamlined towards improving the position of vulnerable students.
- It is important that the University has founded the Student Counselling Centre as an organisational unit which helps the students claim their rights and fulfil their needs. The existence of this student service is of great



significance for further enhancement of equity and social inclusion at the University. It will therefore be important to continue developing services (to be) provided by the Student Counselling Centre.

- The University is recommended to develop standardised procedures for data collection which would be used for continuous evaluation and monitoring of effectiveness and impact of practices that contribute to achieving equity-related objectives. We recommend that these procedures be linked with achievement evaluations of objectives stated in the University Strategy and Funding Agreement.
- We recommend further advancing activities to inform students and staff on student evaluation results. It is important that students and staff know and understand how student evaluation findings are utilised towards improving University quality in different aspects of its work. This will convince students, faculty and administrative staff that student evaluations are fulfilling their purpose, which could motivate even more students to participate.

Study programme design

- Existence of clear policies, norms, and rules regarding working with particular vulnerable groups of students would make it easier for teaching staff to address problems encountered in their daily work and reduce or eliminate potentially inadequate decisions.
- The Expert Team recommends a clearer definition of equity-related professional development for teaching staff at individual departments, since there are different practices in place at the moment and teachers have different interpretations of current rules and practices. University management should ensure mechanisms to enable as many faculty members to attend the Professional Development Program for Higher Education Faculty and make certain that the modules cover all aspects of equity and social inclusion which the University has decided to improve.

Student involvement

- The University is recommended to introduce procedures of continuous evaluation for the 'Student Mentor' and 'Faculty Mentor' projects and their impact on improving equity and social inclusion. Based on evaluation results, the University will be able to make informed decisions on further plans for both projects.

Staff involvement

- The University is recommended to introduce a system for monitoring individual achievements of employees (teaching and administrative staff) and their impact on promoting equity and social inclusion within the University. Introducing institutional awards, recognition, and promotion to recognise employee contribution (teaching and administrative staff) in this area could motivate employees towards being more proactive, thereby boosting a quality culture that recognises the importance of equity and social inclusion.



3.4

University of Applied Science 'Marko Marulić' in Knin: advantages, disadvantages, and recommendations towards improving equity and social inclusion

Advantages

University management and the teaching and administrative staff actively promote equity and social inclusion. Fostering these principles has become part of an understood responsibility practised by a large number of employees in their work. University staff tries to find individual solutions for vulnerable students and the issues they face.

- The University of Applied Science allows enrolment of students graduating from vocational secondary schools without having taken the national matriculation exam (Državna matura). According to employees, 40% of students were admitted this way and most of them proceed to successful completion. By implementing this enrolment policy, the HEI wishes to widen higher education access for students graduating from three-year vocational schools.
- Study programmes make an effort to adapt to prior levels of student knowledge (gymnasium, vocational programmes). Faculty members pointed out that they faced a number of challenges in study programmes amendments, seeing as the institution enrolled students graduating from three- and four-year vocational schools. According to their statements, basic secondary school content is covered in abridged form early on in the course, and additional work is done through individual consultations with students whose level of prior knowledge is lacking.
- According to faculty, the HEI enables enough flexibility in study programme organisation to take into account the diversity of students and their individual needs (e.g. flexibility in study programme delivery includes distance learning and assessment; different forms of advanced technology are used in study programme delivery, such as video conferencing; great emphasis is placed on quality field work teaching, etc.). Students from vulnerable groups confirmed that almost all faculty members were accommodating and helpful in addressing issues (justified absence from class is tolerated; teachers adjust exam-taking formats, provide help in study material procurement, etc.).
- The way study programmes are organised enables different ways of building quality relations between the faculty and the students. According to teaching staff, this is somewhat more difficult to achieve in the first year of study, where the faculty-student ratio is as high as 1:50, but since it goes down to 1:15-20 in later years, it gets easier to build better quality relations between the faculty and the students. Students pointed out that they had very good communication with virtually all their lecturers, and that the teaching staff were accessible and accommodating towards justified student requests. They said that this contributed to a certain 'home atmosphere' at the HEI.
- Field work teaching takes place throughout Croatia. The HEI invests substantial resources in organising field work teaching, making certain that the costs remain affordable to students. The HEI provides professional



study programmes where practical applicability of knowledge and skills acquired is essential, which makes field work teaching all the more important. The institution covers all students' travel costs and participates in their meal costs during field work course provision. The HEI has systematically integrated field work teaching, securing necessary financial and other resources, thus making this form of coursework available to all groups of students.

Disadvantages

- In its Funding Agreement with MSES, the HEI did not select objectives that relate to particular vulnerable groups, such as students of lower socio-economic status, students with disabilities, students over 25 years of age, and part-time students, although the option was available. Based on interviews with stakeholders and project research, the project Expert Team established that all these groups could be included as vulnerable at this institution, as well as students who work, students with health problems, student parents, and students who live outside of their place of study. The Expert Team was unable to find consolidated information on potentially vulnerable groups of students in any of the HEI's key development documents.
- The existing institutional culture at the HEI encourages individual approach in addressing student problems as they appear or become visible. There is no institutional framework in place with formal procedures to continuously promote and ensure equity and social inclusion.
- The HEI occasionally organises workshops and seminars for teaching staff, covering didactical and methodical aspects of working with groups of students vulnerable to education disadvantages. However, there is no continuous professional development for employees (teaching and administrative staff) to build their expertise and capacity for embedding equity and social inclusion in different aspects of institutional work. There is no formal system in place to ensure access to information, advice, and training on inclusive curriculum design.
- Students pointed out that there was no form of student involvement currently in place, since the Student Union ceased operating as the student representation body in early 2014. This means that there are no more student representatives in key institution bodies. According to students, they do not participate in curriculum design processes; however, they pointed out that the Student Union did have very successful cooperation with the institution's management while it was active, and that student representatives had been present in all relevant institution bodies. It is the students' opinion that the institution's management is still open for cooperation with students on individual level and, for the most part, makes an effort to accommodate individual student needs.
- The students feel that they themselves, as well as the University management, are to blame that Student Union elections did not take place in 2014, because that significantly impaired the quality of HEI's work (especially the quality standard relating to student participation in HEI's operations). Students highlight passivity as a general characteristic among the majority of students. They mostly accept the status quo and are not inclined to object, even in the face of circumstances that have a negative impact on their studying.
- According to students, student evaluation surveys are currently not conducted (2014), or are not conducted regularly. They were conducted on a regular basis prior to 2014. Students point out that they had no insight into how the student survey results were utilised towards improving the quality of work at the institution.



Recommendations towards improving equity and social inclusion

Institution management

- If the HEI intends to develop and reinforce a policy of equity and social inclusion, it is our recommendation that it explicitly defines how it sees these issues in an institutional Strategy, especially its mission, vision, and key strategic objectives. This will boost management mechanisms for implementing and evaluating Strategy objectives related to equity enhancement.
- The lack of formal documents, mechanisms, and procedures towards enhancing a policy of equity, as well as formal procedures to evaluate the implementation of corresponding objectives and activities, makes it impossible to gain a reasoned data- and analysis-based insight into the state of play when it comes to equity. Without formal institutional practices in place, the needs of vulnerable groups are in danger of not being recognised, and their rights not being respected.
- The HEI is recommended to develop standardised procedures for data collection in order to continuously evaluate and monitor the effectiveness and impact of practices contributing to equity-related objectives. Future activities should be streamlined based on concrete data and needs.

Developing policies and procedures towards enhancing equity and social inclusion

- Should the HEI decide to create a separate policy and a separate document towards enhancing equity and social inclusion, this document should by all means define the role of equity and consolidate all mechanisms used by the institution to boost these processes. If equity enhancement is to be a long-term strategic development direction at this institution, we recommend that the next generation Funding Agreement be utilised as a mechanism for funding equity-streamlined activities.
- Ensure an institutional framework and mechanisms (organisational units and/or appoint specific employees in charge) which will be continuously available to students, especially those from vulnerable groups - here are some examples: student services such as a Student Counselling Centre, peer support programmes, the faculty mentor programme, funding student projects that address equity enhancement, boosting the role of the Student Union and student associations, etc. A student experiencing problems is more likely to address an expert service or expert staff member than initiate a procedure to claim their rights on their own. It is important to initiate mechanisms to enable early recognition of problems experienced by students from vulnerable groups.
- The project Expert Team realises the limitations imposed by MSES when it comes to available funding for new student services and their staffing. We therefore recommend that the institution consider possible alternative sources of funding: projects funded through EU funds, local government, businesses representatives, and other donors.
- The existence of a Student Affairs Office is extremely important for addressing the needs of vulnerable groups of students. It would be substantial to provide psychological, legal, and career-related advising for students with disabilities as an integral part of Student Affairs Office services. In addition, it is important to ensure that all departments, as well as, all employees and students are familiar with the services provided by the Student Affairs Office.



Study programme design

- It is important to clearly communicate student rights and obligations as an organised activity at the onset of all study programmes. Within this activity, it is substantial to familiarise students with the mechanisms that they can use to communicate their extenuating circumstances and seek possible solutions. This will enable timely recognition and timely address of problems experienced by vulnerable students. It is especially important to ensure intensive faculty mentor support for first-year students. Monitoring new students is particularly important for their academic socialisation.

Academic assessment and feedback

- There should be a system of institutional monitoring and review of academic assessment procedures in order to ensure consistency and comparability of assessment practices among different modules, study programmes, and departments.

Student involvement

- The HEI is recommended to conduct regular evaluations of institutional policies, procedures and practices that enable student involvement in all key aspects of institutional work. Based on data collected, needs identified, and analyses conducted, streamline further activities towards student involvement. Help students understand how they can get involved in institutional processes and how their contributions are utilised to improve the work of the HEI.
- The HEI is recommended to provide students with access to information, training, and resources to encourage them to get involved, self-organised, and efficient in fulfilling their obligations. Provide students with different incentives towards exercising opportunities for active involvement (awards, recognition, free access to particular resources, student project funding, EU project involvement, etc.).
- It is commendable that the HEI encourages close cooperation between students and faculty. We suggest that this potential be utilised towards starting a faculty mentor programme, which would then formally ensure mentor support throughout students' academic experience.

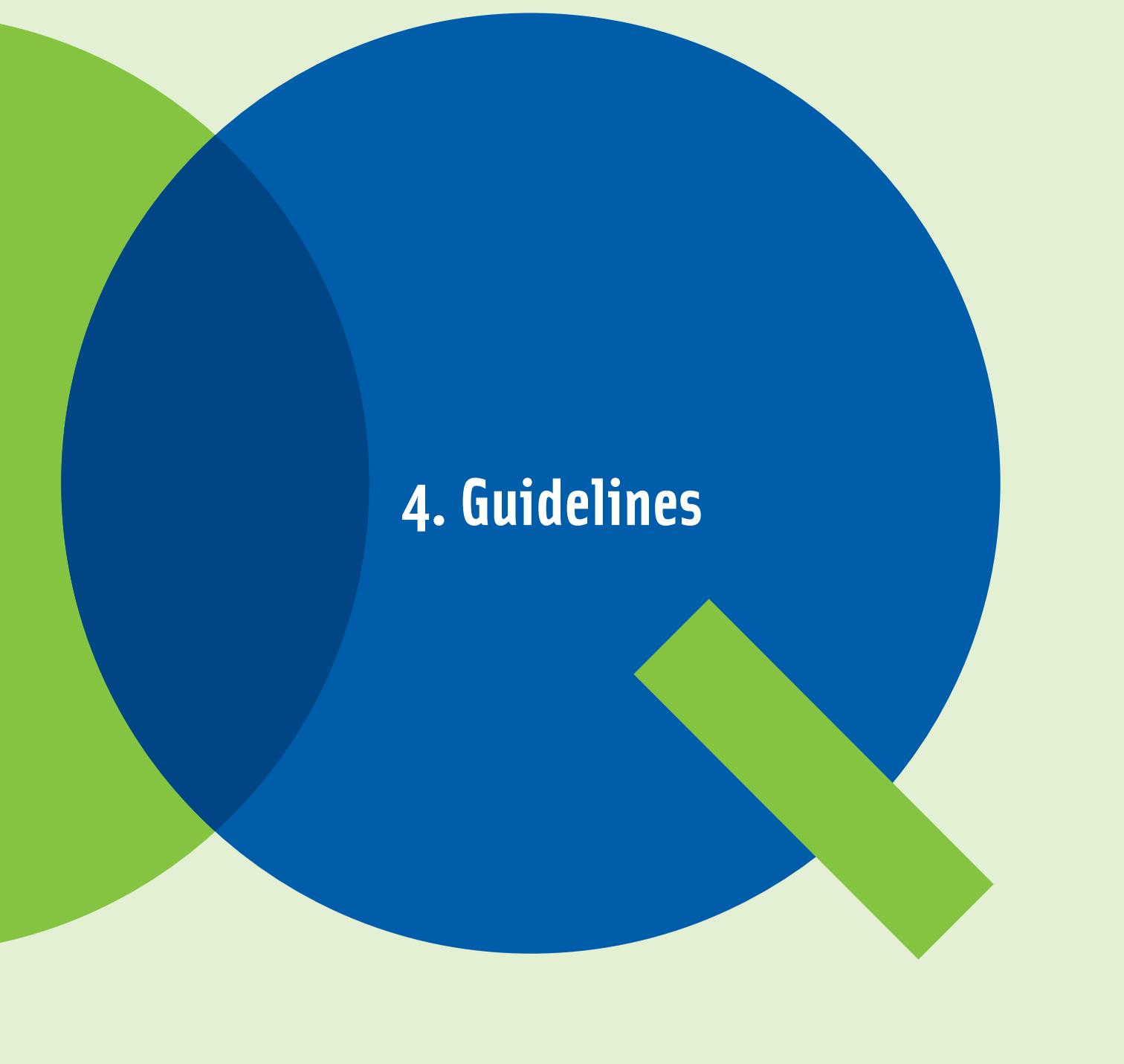
Staff involvement

- The project Expert Team recommends that the institution define plans for professional development of teaching and other staff in the area of equity and social inclusion. Teaching staff should have continuous access to information, advice, and training in order to be able to design inclusive curricula. Study programmes should be continuously evaluated to identify and prevent potential negative impact on particular groups of students.
- The HEI is recommended to introduce a system for monitoring and evaluating individual achievements of university employees (teaching and administrative staff) and their impact on fostering equity and social inclusion. Introducing institutional awards, recognition, and promotion to recognise staff contribution to equity enhancement could motivate employees towards being more proactive, which would in turn boost a quality culture that recognises the importance of equity and social inclusion.



Study resources, space, and environment

- It is important to ensure accessibility of teaching and study locations for all students. For this reason, the HEI should enable access and free movement on its premises to students with disabilities, regardless of the fact that there are currently no disabled students enrolled. Accessible premises may lead to higher enrolment of students with disabilities.
- Since the HEI provides professional study programmes, whereby practical applicability of knowledge and skills acquired is sought at the job market, it would be of essence that the institution assist its students in securing quality internships, primarily within the county, or in a broader area. Study programmes need to be structured so as to enable assessment and evaluation of knowledge and skills acquired by students during their internships.



4. Guidelines

4.1

Guidelines and areas for enhancing equity and social inclusion

A set of **Guidelines** was developed within the E-Quality project as a **non-prescriptive tool** which higher education institutions can use to critically reflect on the extent to which equity and social inclusion have been embedded in their management mechanisms, study programme design and delivery, and their student and staff achievement assessment procedures. HEIs are not obliged to use these Guidelines, and they are not a part of formal, legally prescribed procedures for higher education quality assessment and monitoring. HEIs can decide independently whether they want to enhance equity and social inclusion with the use of these Guidelines.

The Guidelines comprise **eight potential areas for enhancing equity and social inclusion at institutions of higher education**. Table 3 provides a description of all eight areas. Each area contains a number of statements against which each individual institution can assess their contribution to enhancing equity and social inclusion. A separate publication within this project, 'Guidelines for Fostering Equity and Social Inclusion at Higher Education Institutions,' provides a comprehensive list of these statements, as well as assessments of achievement levels for each of the eight areas. The publication is a part of the E-Quality Edition, and it is available (in Croatian only) at the project website, www.ipa-equality.eu, or IDE's website, www.iro.hr:

- Šćukanec, N. (2015). Guidelines for Fostering Equity and Social Inclusion at Higher Education Institutions (Guidelines for Higher Education Institutions in Croatia). Zagreb: Institute for the Development of Education.

Table 3. Areas for enhancing equity and social inclusion

Areas for enhancing equity and social inclusion

Institutional management

The HEI successfully organises, manages, and coordinates activities related to enhancing equity and social inclusion. Key documents of the institution contain clear, unambiguous definitions, objectives, and activities towards enhancing equity and social inclusion. The human resources policy strengthens institutional and personal responsibility for embedding equity and social inclusion into the curriculum. There are standardised procedures in place for collecting data on different characteristics of the student body, and the institution implements regular evaluations of the effectiveness and impact of policies and practices regarding equity and social inclusion.



Developing policies and procedures

The HEI has created policies and procedures that enable and encourage embedding equity and social inclusion into different segments of institutional work. There are specific measures in place towards facilitating study access and encouraging successful completion for vulnerable groups of students. There are student services in place whose activities are beneficial for vulnerable groups of students. There is systematic integration of exchange of best practices and research in the area of equity and social inclusion within the institution and beyond.

Study programme design

Study programme organisation and delivery enable sufficient flexibility and comprise different approaches to learning and teaching, which take into account the diversity of students and build a successful working relationship between the faculty and the students. Study programmes are adapted to prior levels of student knowledge and include different forms of academic assessment and feedback. There is an opportunity for students and other stakeholders to get involved in study programme design. There is continuous evaluation of study programmes so as to respond to the needs of different groups of students, and to detect and prevent potential negative impact on particular groups of students.

Study programme delivery

Student rights and obligations are clearly communicated as an organised activity at the onset of study programmes. Study materials are available on time and in different forms. Reviews of academic assessment procedures ensure consistency and comparability of assessment practices among different modules, study programmes, departments, and faculties. The organisation of study programmes enables building quality relations between faculty and students. Mutual student cooperation is encouraged.

Academic assessment and feedback

Procedures of academic assessment are clear and transparent. Criteria for the final mark are clearly defined, and all students are notified in advance. Assessment criteria are just and non-discriminatory. Different modes of assessment and feedback are used continuously in order to provide students with more than one indicator of how they achieved the planned learning outcomes.

Student involvement

Institutional policies, procedures, and practices enable and encourage continuous involvement of students in all key aspects of the institution's work. Students participate in study programme design and delivery processes. Students have insight into how their evaluations are utilised towards improving the quality of work at the institution. The HEI provides equal opportunity for all students, especially those identified as belonging to vulnerable groups.

Staff involvement

The HEI systematically encourages employees to embed equity and social inclusion in institutional work. Lecturers embed equity in study programme planning, design, and delivery. There is monitoring and evaluation of individual achievements of employees and their impact on promoting equity and social inclusion at the institution. There are institutional awards, recognition, and promotions in place to recognise staff contributions towards fostering equity and social inclusion.



Study resources, space, and environment

Study resources and facilities are conducive to fostering equity and social inclusion. Class scheduling is sufficiently flexible, taking into account student obligations and responsibilities. When planning for construction works and adaptations, consideration is given to ensuring spatial accessibility for all students and staff. Study resources are easily available, non-discriminatory, and socially and culturally diverse.

4.2

Guidelines and their use

When using these Guidelines, the following principles contributing to their more effective and efficient use should be considered:

Flexible use on institutional and individual levels

These Guidelines are a flexible tool that can be utilised in different ways. They are appropriate for use on an institutional level. They can be utilised by the central governing structures for the entire institution, or by individual units on the level of faculty, department, or other smaller organisational units. They can be used separately by individual student services to improve their work with students. It is also possible to combine all of these approaches through intra-institutional teams or other forms of collaboration between different institutional units. When utilising the Guidelines on an institutional level, it is advisable to incorporate perspectives of different stakeholders: management, teaching staff, administrative staff, students, representatives of the local or economic community, civil society organisations, etc. On the other hand, the Guidelines can be used on an individual level, meaning that teaching and administrative staff can utilise them in improving curricula and academic assessment of students. They can be used by the institution's governing structures or by managing, decision-making employees. They can be used by students and student organisations if they want to enhance equity within their units or on the institutional level.

Various modes of use: assessment, monitoring, framework for discussion and data collection

The Guidelines enable implementation of different procedures for enhancing equity and social inclusion: they can be used for self-assessment, or subsequent monitoring if an institution or an individual opt for systematic, continuous, long-term enhancement of equity and social inclusion. The Guidelines enable comparison between different phases of monitoring to establish progress in achieving the objectives. It is also possible to use the Guidelines to introduce external assessment by an independent body or expert institution that can evaluate the level of equity development and make recommendations for improvement. It is also possible to combine external and internal assessments. The choice and combination of procedures depend on the strategic objectives, needs, and environment within which the HEI, its units, staff, and students operate. The Guidelines can be a certain guidebook or reminder for systematic consideration and discussion of equity improvements on the institutional level, study programme level and course level, within different projects or different forms of public events. They can be of use in structured data collection as well as forming future plans and setting future priorities.



Use: single instance or in regular intervals over a longer time frame

The frequency of use of these Guidelines depends for the most part on the mode in which they are utilised. If a mode of institutional assessment is opted for, the recommendation is towards regular monitoring in three- to five-year intervals. However, it is also possible to use the Guidelines in a single instance in order to establish the current condition, or just once to collect data for specific projects, public campaigns, etc. Also, the Guidelines can be used as a tool for HEIs to monitor the achievement of objectives set in their three-year Funding Agreements with the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education, and Sports.

Eight areas for enhancing equity and social inclusion

The Guidelines are organised into eight areas, covering higher education institutional management; developing different institutional policies; study programme design and delivery; academic assessment and feedback; modes of student and staff involvement; and study resources. Those who decide to use the Guidelines can choose independently whether they wish to fulfil all eight areas or just some of them.

Achievement assessment scales: enable comparison and progress measurement

Each of the eight areas contains a number of statements, which need to be assessed in terms of the extent of fulfilment. Table 4 provides two potential assessment scales for individual statements. It is possible to use either, or both scales. The level of achievement or points are registered in tables underneath each statement (see Chapter V in separate publication 'Guidelines for Fostering Equity and Social Inclusion at Higher Education Institutions,' available in Croatian). Tables can also be filled out with different observations and examples estimated as important in forming opinions on achievement levels, as well as on recommendations for improvement. Table 4 was based on the document 'Embedding Equality and Diversity in the Curriculum: Self-Evaluation Framework', prepared by Helen May and Liz Thomas for The Higher Education Academy – the Table was adapted for the needs of the E-Quality project.

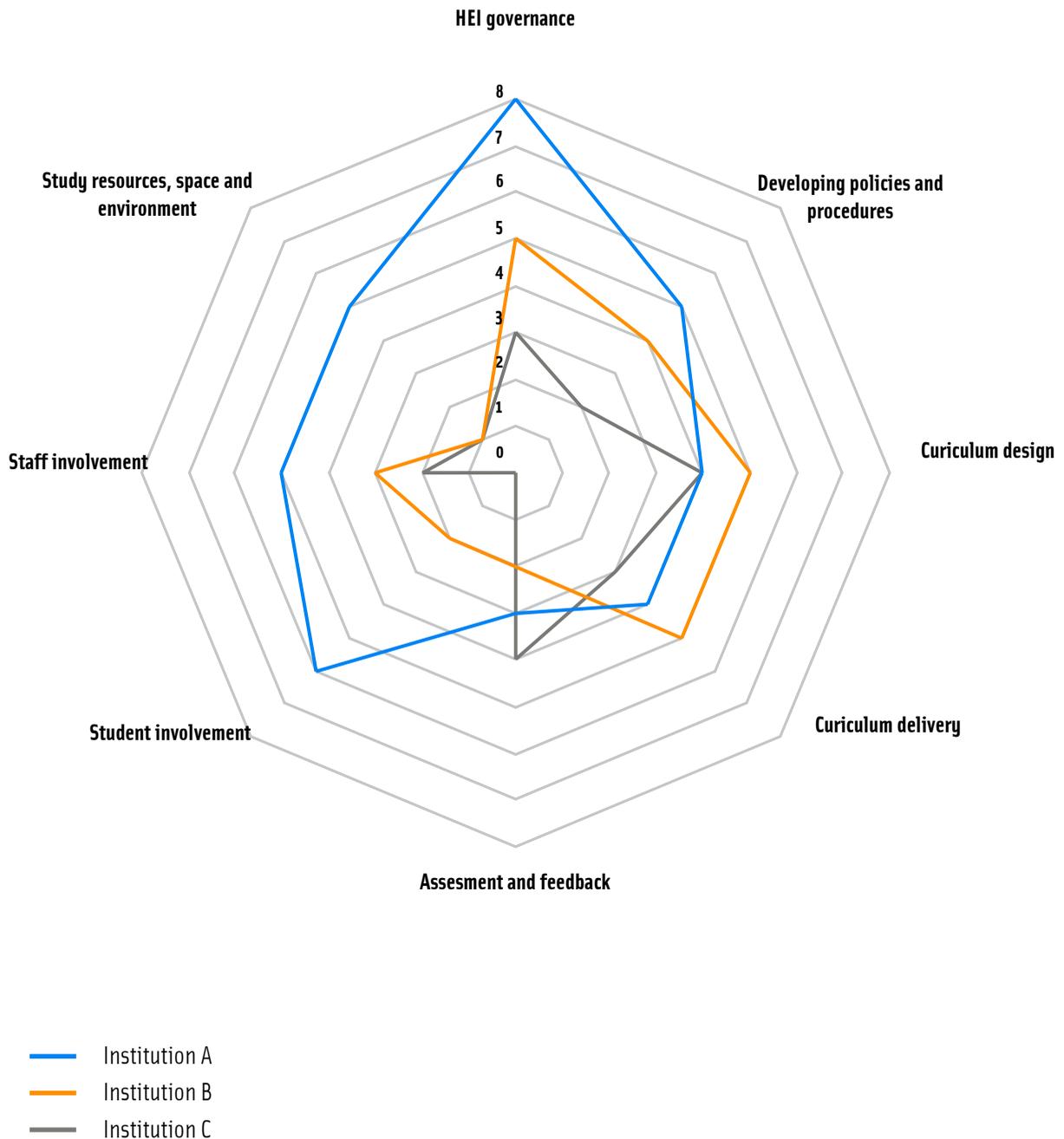
Assessment scales enable Guidelines users to review the level of their equity enhancement. If this review process is repeated over set intervals, users can compare their achievements and measure progress. Also, they can compare themselves with similar Guidelines users and measure their achievements in a broader context. Image 1 presents a potential way of illustrating and monitoring users' own results over a longer period of time or of comparison with similar users. Users can further work out the scales and ways of presenting achievements on their own. It is our recommendation that the scales be used for each area separately, without forming a final mark or scale for all areas.

Open tool for adaptation and upgrades

These Guidelines are suitable for use within any type of higher education institution: universities, universities of applied science, and university colleges of applied sciences. They can be used in parallel with different resources or as a complement, aimed at enhancing equity and social inclusion in higher education. The tendency of these Guidelines is not to be a closed, complete system, but to be open to updates, upgrades, and adaptations to different types of users.



Image 1. Comparing results related to enhancement of equity and social inclusion at institutions of higher education⁴.



⁴ This image provides an example of how users can compare their own achievements in different stages of development, or how achievements could be compared between institutions. The outcomes result from applying the Achievement Assessment Scale (see Table 4) to all eight areas comprised in the Guidelines.



Table 4. Achievement levels

General assessment	Points	Description
Fully achieved (A)	8	Yes, achieved fully, and the level of achievement passed an external evaluation and recognition procedure.
	7	Yes, achieved fully; impact evaluation is continuous, followed by corresponding action.
	6	Yes, but impact evaluation remains to be implemented.
Partially achieved (B)	5	Yes, but the process is ongoing and the responsibility has been widened to include a broader group of employees, students, programmes, and locations.
	4	Yes, but the process is ongoing and comprises a limited number of employees, students, programmes, and locations.
Initial stage (C)	3	No, but a comprehensive plan has been created.
	2	No, but initial plans have been started.
	1	No, but there is an awareness of the need for change.
Not begun (D)	0	Not being considered.
	N/A	Not relevant.



**5. Quality label to
enhance equity and social
inclusion in higher
education in Croatia**



This section discusses the concept of a quality label to improve equity and social inclusion in higher education (HE) by drawing on two relevant European examples. Furthermore, it proposes an approach that could be adopted in Croatia to support the use of quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms to improve equity and social inclusion in HE. This initiative has been developed as part of the E-Quality project. The concept of a quality label paper has been written in consultation with the project Advisory Group, and the ideas were tested out and refined following feedback from across the HE sector at the project conference, held on 21 January 2015 at the University of Rijeka.

The purpose of this concept is to set out the rationale for a quality label, with a particular focus on the advantages and challenges of introducing a quality label to enhance equity and social inclusion into the Croatian higher education sector. It presents some examples of quality labels from other contexts and, drawing on their evaluative studies, to inform thinking in the Croatian sector. It concludes with some recommendations for the way forward, based on discussion and consultation with the consortium members of the E-Quality project, as well representatives of different higher education institutions (HEIs) who participated at the final project conference held at the University of Rijeka.

5.1

The purpose of quality labels in higher education

Quality labels are used in other European countries and internationally to encourage and reward certain types of policies and practices by organisations, such as higher education institutions. This paper draws on two examples from the European higher education sector: the Equality Challenge Unit's ATHENA Swan charter mark, which addresses female equality issues in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine in the UK; and the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders's (NVAO) internationalisation quality label in the Netherlands and Flanders. These examples were chosen for their relevance, and the availability of research and evaluation of these quality labels. This concept does not propose simplistic cherry picking (McGrath, 2001, p398) or naive borrowing (Evans et al, 1999, p2), but rather draws on these comparative examples and experience to extract information about alternative approaches, key considerations and the benefits and challenges of a quality label.

In the UK the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), which is a registered charity that works to further and support equality and diversity for staff and students in higher education institutions, has developed and managed three equality charter mark schemes. These have contributed to improving gender and race equality in higher education. They state that:

These programmes are catalysts for change – encouraging higher education institutions, research institutes and others to transform their cultures and make a real impact on the lives of staff and students.

NVAO was established by the Dutch and Flemish governments as an independent accreditation organisation tasked with providing expert and objective assessment of the quality of higher education in Flanders and the Netherlands. The NVAO has worked with experts and the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA) to develop an 'internationalisation' framework, which enables Dutch and Flanders higher education institutions to assess themselves against, and apply for recognition. On the basis of this framework, the ECA is piloting an internation-



alisation quality label at programme and institutional level. Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE), the Croatian quality assurance agency, is part of this pilot. A summary overview of these two quality labels is provided in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Summary features of two quality labels

Feature	NVAO	ECU
Focus	Internationalisation	Equality and diversity
Where	the Netherlands and Flanders	United Kingdom
Accrediting body	National accreditation body	HE charity
Established	2010	2005
Pilot/evaluation	Yes, programme piloted	Yes, evaluated and revised
Unit of Assessment	Academic programmes	Departments, institutions and re- search institutes
Compulsory	No	No
Pre-requisites	To be distinctive in the field of inter- nationalisation	To subscribe and to apply for recog- nition within specified time periods
Fee payable	No	Yes
Self-evaluation	Yes	Yes
Expert site visit	Yes	No
External review panel	Yes	Yes
Action plan	No	Yes
Prescriptive	No	No
Guidance	Yes, after pilot to some extent	Yes, to some extent
Levels of award	4: unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good and excellent	4: no award, bronze, silver and gold
Duration of award	Unknown	3 years

A quality label can simply be designed to reassure students or other stakeholders of the quality of a particular aspect of (higher education) provision. However, such an initiative can have more developmental aims, associated with raising expectations and standards, and motivating individuals and institutions to improve their provision.

The research undertaken as part of the E-Quality project (Doolan et al, 2015) identified a number of ways in which the higher education experience of students from specific groups is not equitable to other students and how it could be improved to enhance equity and social inclusion in higher education in Croatia. A quality label would therefore be a useful addition to enhance equity and social inclusion in Croatian higher education. It is possible that a Croatian quality label to enhance equity and social inclusion in higher education could have multiple objectives, such as:



1. To encourage higher education institutions, faculties and programmes in Croatia to further engage with and respond to the needs of students from non-traditional/disadvantaged/equity groups; and
2. To recognise institutions which have made progress with regards to making the student experience and outcomes better for students from equity groups.
3. To share good practice across institutions and the HE sector in Croatia and beyond.

5.2

Key elements of a quality label

There are many alternative ways in which a quality label can be constructed and used. Table 5 above includes descriptions of two relevant examples from across Europe. However, it is useful to identify some of the key elements of quality labels:

- A specific unit of assessment (UoA) identified, such as an academic department or faculty, a service provider or institutional function, or the entire institution.
- Internal review of current provision conducted, usually facilitated by guidance or a semi-structured process.
- External review conducted, either of the materials submitted by the UoA, or more directly, e.g. via a site visit.
- Action plan developed, either as part of the internal review process, or following the external review to address limitations and shortfalls identified.
- Judgement of outcome made, e.g. whether the quality mark is awarded or not, or whether further developments are required or suggested.

5.3

Advantages of a quality label

There are a range of advantages and benefits that can be gained from the use of a quality label to enhance equity and social inclusion in higher education. There are advantages associated with the process itself, and there are more specific outcomes. A directly comparable quality label does not exist, and therefore it is not possible to specify the outcomes. However, the following benefits that arise from the process have been identified by reviewing the work of other quality labels. Broadly, engaging in the quality label process is both motivating and informative, developing the capacity of the individuals, the unit of assessment (UoA) and the sector more widely, and it is an effective mechanism for change. Specific benefits include:



- **Raising awareness.** A quality label would draw attention to equity and social inclusion in higher education, and initiate further dialogue to improve the number of under-represented students and vulnerable groups participating in higher education, and the quality of their experience.
- **Promoting inclusion.** Encourages institutions to recognise and respond to the needs of students from different cultural, social and educational backgrounds, and provides ongoing incentive to maintain and improve policy and practice for equality.
- **Developing understanding.** The review processes provide opportunities for the development of greater understanding of equity and social inclusion in higher education, as well as the ways in which the entitlements and needs of a more diverse student population can be fully met.
- **Enabling critical reflection.** Taking part in the quality label process encourages and facilitates critical reflection, including review of current practices, recognition of and identifying areas for development.
- **Encouraging engagement.** An external quality label provides a framework for engagement of staff from across the UoA.
- **Promoting collaboration.** The process of addressing equity and social inclusion through activities such as review and self-evaluation, and the development of an action plan and the implementation of change encourages dialogue and collaboration across the unit of assessment, and across the sector.
- **Improving communication.** Not only is collaboration improved, but mechanisms to work together may be enhanced too, for example effective communication across the UoA.
- **Recognising good practice.** The quality label provides a mechanism for identifying, celebrating, rewarding and sharing good practice, and recognises institutions, faculties and departments which have recognised and taken steps to address the differences in experiences of students from diverse backgrounds.
- **External reference.** A quality label can provide a structure against which to **benchmark** progress, and motivate further development and change.
- **Engaging senior managers.** External recognition of the existing good practice within a UoA, and the changes it makes to further improve equity and social inclusion, creates an incentive for the engagement of senior managers to endorse, encourage and commend the work.
- **Enhancing capacity.** The quality label offers opportunities for development of individuals, academic units and whole institutions. Through the process of review and the sharing of good practice, the capacity of the UoA and the sector to review and develop its policies and practices to improve equity and social inclusion is enhanced.
- **Encouraging sustainable change.** The process encourages sustainable changes, including the changes within institutional/departmental structures and processes, at strategic and operational levels, and promotes changes in culture and attitudes.
- **Effective mechanism for change.** By drawing on all the advantages identified above, a quality label is an effective mechanism for change. For example, talking about one of the quality labels described below, one survey respondent commented: *'It's [Athena SWAN] the most effective standard/process/lever for change I've come across in 12 years of equality work, including impact assessment.'*
- **Quality enhancement.** Such a process contributes to improving the quality of higher education for students from equity groups in individual UoAs and across the HE sector.



5.4

Challenges of a quality label

There are some potential disadvantages and challenges to using a quality label. Again, these relate to the process, rather than the outcomes, as there is no directly comparable scheme.

- **Time consuming.** The process of reviewing current work in relation to the social dimension, identifying areas for development and implementing change is time consuming for the UoA. This may be particularly problematic for small UoAs with a limited number of staff to draw on, or with other competing priorities.
- **Cost implications.** The exact nature of cost implications will vary depending on the nature of the quality label process. There will, however, be costs in terms of staff time and possibly other direct and indirect costs associated with participating in such a programme.
- **Specific challenges.** It may be more difficult to engage units of assessment that face particular challenges with regards to the social dimension, including those with a largely homogeneous student population, and without a commitment to the social dimension.
- **Long-term commitment.** Developing and utilising a quality label involves a longer term investment by UoAs and the implementing/co-ordinating/sponsoring organisations.
- **National capacity.** It may be questioned whether the Croatian HE sector has the capacity to take on the additional work entailed in this equity quality award programme. Still, it is an important topic, embedded into the Bologna process, and supported by national policy developments. It is therefore of great value to the HE sector to embrace the opportunities presented by the development of an equity quality label, and to develop its internal capacity to support this work. In the early stages of the label the work may draw on experts from the E-Quality project or international experts, but by building in capacity into the process of awarding the quality label, national expertise will be further developed.

5.5

Proposed way forward in Croatia: recommendations

The issues raised in this chapter were discussed in groups by participants at the E-Quality project's final conference held on 21 January 2015 at the University of Rijeka. Participants at the E-Quality final conference included representatives from the three HEIs participating in the project (University of Rijeka, University of Zadar and University of Applied Science 'Marko Marulić' in Knin), the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, the ASHE, Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, IDE, student association 'Studentski zbor' and other guests. Drawing on this concept, project research and the feedback at the conference, the project team made the following recommendations regarding the procedures for awarding a quality label for equity and social inclusion in higher education in Croatia:



1. The quality label will focus on equity and social inclusion in higher education.
2. The quality label should be developed through a partnership approach. ASHE should act as a co-ordinating and awarding body. ASHE should involve IDE and representatives of student associations, with the option of other partners to be involved (e.g. higher education institutions such as those which participated in the E-Quality project, and other experts). These bodies should be constituted as the Steering Group for an initial term of five years.
3. The quality label should be developed and implemented as a pilot as soon as possible (ideally 2015/16 or alternatively 2016/17), and be subject to a formative evaluation.
4. The quality label should be developmental, and participation should be voluntary. It could nevertheless be aligned with funding agreements and their performance funding requirements to enhance desirability.
5. The quality label should be sufficiently flexible to enable the institution to select the most appropriate UoA (e.g. institution, faculty, department or programme).
6. The following conditions are met by each UoA: (i) they are a registered higher education provider⁵; (ii) equity and social inclusion is included in the institution's strategic mission.
7. The quality label should utilise the self-evaluation framework developed by the E-Quality project (see Chapter 4), and UoAs should be required and supported to develop an action plan.
8. The quality label awarding procedures should be built into the external quality assurance and enhancement processes led by ASHE, e.g. the audit process.
9. To maintain standards and consistency, it is recommended that the ASHE reviewers are trained by experts in equity and social inclusion.
10. The intention should be that HEIs pay no fee. Therefore, the awarding of the quality label should become a voluntary component of ASHE's external quality assurance processes. If there is a need for additional funding, it may be necessary to consider charging a fee, which, ideally, could be off-set against the funding agreements.
11. Three key functions have been identified: (i) Management and co-ordination of the quality label; (ii) Standards and awards associated with the quality label; and (iii) Support and capacity development of the sector/HEIs.
12. ASHE should be responsible for management and co-ordination; ASHE convenes the Steering Group (including experts) which ensures the standards of the quality label and the consistency of the awards. The operation of the Steering Group may be altered to ensure it is in line with the approach used by ASHE in relation to other similar additional quality processes. IDE and partners should be involved in providing support to institutions to develop their understanding and capacity in relation to equity and social inclusion.
13. ASHE should make award recommendations based on the self-evaluation, the site visit and the action plan. The levels of award need to be determined. These recommendations should be reviewed and agreed by the trained Steering Group or expert panel to ensure consistency of awards.
14. The concept of the quality label in equity and social inclusion is owned by the project 'E-Quality: Linking Quality and Social Inclusion in Higher Education in Croatia'.

⁵ Higher education institution is listed in the official register of higher education institutions in Croatia (Upisnik visokih učilišta) at the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports of the Republic of Croatia.



Table 6 below summarises the features of the proposed equity and social inclusion label using the same headings as in Table 5.

Table 6: Summary of the features of the proposed equity and social inclusion label

Feature	Equity and social inclusion quality label
Focus	Equity and social inclusion
Where	Croatia initially
Lead body	Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE)
Established	2015/16 or as soon as possible thereafter
Pilot/evaluation	Implemented as a pilot which is to be evaluated
Unit of Assessment	Flexible to enable the HEI to decide: institution, faculty, department, programme
Compulsory	No, voluntary and developmental in nature
Pre-requisites	Each UoA is a registered higher education provider ¹ ; and equity and social inclusion is included in the institution's strategic mission
Fee payable	Not initially
Self-evaluation	Yes
Expert site visit	Yes, incorporated into quality assurance and enhancement audit process
External review panel	Yes, reviewed by Steering Group or expert panel appointed by the partners
Action plan	Yes
Prescriptive	No
Guidance	Yes and support provided to develop institutions understanding and capacity. Training is provided to reviewers.
Levels of award	To be agreed
Duration of award	5 years (to align with quality cycle)



Abbreviations

ASHE	Agency for Science and Higher Education, Croatia
ECA	European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education
ECU	Equality Challenge Unit, UK
E-Quality	Acronym for the project 'Linking quality and social inclusion in higher education in Croatia'
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IDE	Institute for the Development of Education, Croatia
MSES	Ministry of Science, Education, and Sports, Croatia
NVAO	Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders
UoA	Unit of Assessment

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About E-Quality Edition

E-Quality Edition is a series of six publications that address quality enhancement and fostering equity and social inclusion in higher education. The 'E-Quality Edition' comprises the following publications:

Doolan, K., Košutić, I. and Barada, V. (2015). **Institutional Incentives and Obstacles to Study Success: Student Perspective** (Research report). Zagreb: Institute for the Development of Education.

[Available only in Croatian: Institucijski poticaji i prepreke za uspjeh u studiju: perspektiva studenata/ica (Izvešće o nalazima istraživanja)].

Project research report, identifying institutional obstacles and incentives to successful studying for vulnerable groups of students.

Šćukanec, N. (2015). **Reports on Equity and Social Inclusion at the University of Rijeka, University of Zadar, and University of Applied Science 'Marko Marulić' in Knin** (E-Quality Project Findings and Recommendations). Zagreb: Institute for the Development of Education.

[Available only in Croatian: Izveštaji o stanju pravednosti i socijalne uključenosti na Sveučilištu u Rijeci, Sveučilištu u Zadru i Veleučilištu 'Marko Marulić' u Kninu (Nalazi i preporuke projekta E-Quality)].

HEIs external assessment reports, evaluating the level of equity and social inclusion in higher education management, study programme design and delivery, and student and staff achievement assessment.

Šćukanec, N. (2015). **Guidelines for Fostering Equity and Social Inclusion at Higher Education Institutions** (Guidelines for Higher Education Institutions in Croatia). Zagreb: Institute for the Development of Education.

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Thomas, L. (2015). **Quality Label to Enhance Equity and Social Inclusion in Higher Education in Croatia** (Recommendations and Overview of International Best Practice). Zagreb: Institute for the Development of Education.

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Šćukanec, N. (2015). **How to Enhance Equity and Social Inclusion at Institutions of Higher Education?** (Main E-Quality Project Findings and Recommendations). Zagreb: Institute for the Development of Education.

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A summary of key E-Quality project activities and education policy recommendations.



Šćukanec, N., Doolan, K., Thomas, L., Košutić, I. and Barada, V. (2015). **Enhancing Quality in Higher Education by Fostering Equity and Social Inclusion** (Overview of E-Quality Project Results). Zagreb: Institute for the Development of Education.

The final E-Quality project publication, providing an overview of project results.

Project Coordinator:



Institute for the
Development of Education

Institute for the Development of Education
Trg Nikole Zrinskog 9
10000 Zagreb, Croatia
t: +385 1 4555 151 / +385 1 4817 195
f: +385 1 4555 150
iro@iro.hr
www.iro.hr

Project partners:

University of Rijeka
www.uniri.hr

University of Zadar
www.unizd.hr

Polytechnic "Marko Marulic" in Knin
www.veleknin.hr

Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education
www.azvo.hr

Institute for Social Research in Zagreb
www.idi.hr

Association for Higher Education Development „Universitas“
www.universitas.hr

Contracting Authority Level 1:



Ministry of Science, Education and Sport

Ministry of Science, Education and Sport
esf@mzos.hr
www.mzos.hr

Contracting Authority Level 2:



Agency for Vocational
Education and Training
and Adult Education

Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education
The Department for Financing and Contracting of EU programmes (DEFKO)
defco@asoo.hr
www.asoo.hr

For more information on EU funds: www.strukturnifondovi.hr



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Institute for the Development of Education
Trg Nikole Zrinskog 9
HR - 10000 Zagreb, Croatia
t: +385 1 4555 151 / +385 1 4817 195
f: +385 1 4555 150
iro@iro.hr
www.iro.hr