



**LIFELONG LEARNING
FOR ALL NETWORK**

Enhancing equity and inclusion in higher education in Croatia: analysis and policy recommendations

Thomas Farnell, Zvonimir Anić, Nikola Baketa, Branislava Baranović,
Vesna Kovač, Teo Matković, Ivana Miočić, Iva Odak,
Saša Puzić, Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt

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Author: Lifelong Learning for All Network - Working Group for Higher Education:

- Thomas Farnell, Institute for the Development of Education
- Zvonimir Anić, Institute for the Development of Education
- Nikola Baketa, Institute for Social Research in Zagreb
- Branislava Baranović, Institute for the Development of Education
- Vesna Kovač, Association for Development of Higher Education "Universitas"
- Teo Matković, Institute for Social Research in Zagreb
- Ivana Miočić, Association for Development of Higher Education "Universitas"
- Iva Odak, Institute for Social Research in Zagreb
- Saša Puzić, Institute for Social Research in Zagreb
- Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt, Institute for the Development of Education

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1. INTRODUCTION

Policy context

This publication provides an analysis of educational inequality challenges in higher education in Croatia and proposes possible solutions in the form of policy recommendations. The analysis and recommendations were prepared by a working group of the Lifelong Learning for All Network, which brings together experts, researchers and civil society organisations dealing with the issue of educational inequalities in Croatia in a lifelong learning context, from the level of early and preschool education to higher education and adult education.

In 2014, Croatia's *Strategy for Education, Science, and Technology* (Official Gazette 124/14) included a set of goals and measures related to improving the social dimension of higher education, namely the inclusion of underrepresented and vulnerable groups in higher education. Based on this strategy, the Croatian Government adopted and implemented a *National Plan for Improving the Social Dimension of Higher Education in Croatia* (for the period 2019-2021) in 2019. The continuation of work on these objectives was ensured as part of the *National Recovery and Resilience Plan*. In developing these policy recommendations, the principles and guidelines for the social dimension adopted by the European Higher Education Area in 2020 were taken into account.

The analysis and recommendations were developed in late 2022 and early 2023, at the time when a new overarching national education policy document was drafted and adopted: the ***National Plan for the Development of the Education System until 2027*** (hereafter: NPDES). The Network sees the analysis and recommendations as complementary to the NPDES, as the plan also identified educational inequalities as a key challenge of the Croatian educational system and the mid-term vision of the plan is for the education and upbringing system to be “inclusive, quality-driven and equitable.” Furthermore, the Network participated in the Government’s public consultation on the NPDES, and the majority of the Network’s proposals for strengthening the emphasis on equity and inclusion in the document were accepted. We believe that many of the recommendations presented in this document are complementary to the NPDES and can be implemented alongside the already planned measures. These recommendations also complement Croatia’s new ***Action Plan for Improving the Social Dimension of Higher Education for the period 2023-2025***. The proposed long-term measures are seen as initiatives that could be incorporated into future action plans and strategic documents to be adopted at the national level.

About the Lifelong Learning for All Network

The Lifelong Learning for All Network was launched in October 2020 through the project “Thematic Network for Lifelong Learning Available to All”, co-funded by the European Union through the European Social Fund and coordinated by the Institute for the Development of Education. The Network comprises 60 experts from 22 institutions (see Appendix 2). The Network views the topic of educational inequalities through the prism of lifelong learning, encompassing the following levels:

- early childhood education and care
- primary education
- secondary education (gymnasiums, vocational schools and art schools)
- higher education
- adult education (from primary to higher education, as well as non-formal education).

The Lifelong Learning for All Network advocates for an equitable and inclusive educational system in Croatia. Equity and inclusion in the context of education are closely related terms that address various forms of educational inequalities. The Network defines these terms and their interrelation in accordance with definitions provided by UNESCO (2017):

- **Equity** in the context of education refers to the *principle* of ensuring that "all learners are considered equally important." The principle implies that learners are diverse and that many learners may be disadvantaged compared to others during the learning process due to their personal characteristics and external circumstances. The principle of equity seeks to ensure that all learners successfully participate in education and achieve educational outcomes, regardless of such characteristics and circumstances.
- **Inclusion** in the context of education refers to the *process* of removing barriers to access, participation and successful completion of education. The process involves implementing measures at the level of educational institutions and the educational system aimed at equalising opportunities among learners. In this sense, the inclusivity of the educational system is the foundation for achieving equity in education.

From 2020 to 2023, the Network conducted **six research studies on educational inequalities** at all levels of education in Croatia, resulting in 14 journal articles and book chapters. The research carried out by the project's thematic working groups was the following:

- study on the attitudes of policymakers, educational institutions and other stakeholders about educational inequalities **at every educational level** (Farnell [ed.], 2022)
- study on the experiences of teaching staff and professional staff related to educational inequalities **in early childhood education and care and primary education** (Bouillet and Brajković, 2023.a; Bouillet and Brajković, 2023.b)
- study on the experiences of teachers and students related to educational inequalities **in secondary education** (Puzić et al., 2023)
- study on dropout in **higher education** (Odak et al., 2023; Matković, 2023.a)
- study on educational inequalities in **adult education** (Matković and Jaklin, 2021; Matković and Jaklin, 2023; Matković, 2023.b)
- study of the framing of **educational inequalities in strategic documents of the Croatian government** (Šćukanec Schmidt et al., 2023)

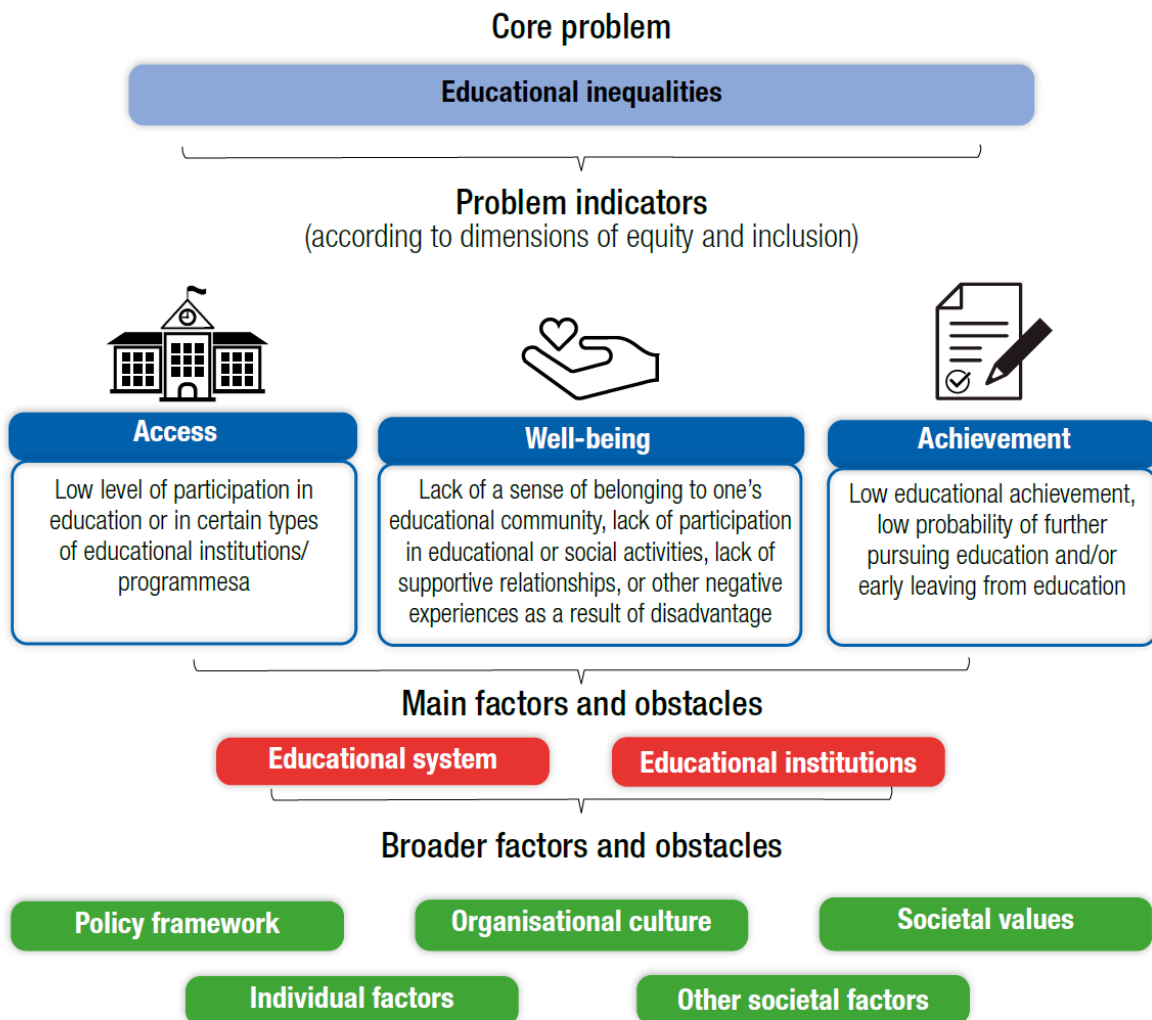
Based on the results of this newly conducted research, as well as on insights from previous studies, the Network's working groups prepared an in-depth analysis and synthesis of educational inequality challenges at each level of the educational system in Croatia. Each working group then formulated policy recommendations for enhancing equity and inclusion, as well as horizontal recommendations for the educational system as a whole. Drafts of recommendations were subject to structured dialogues through roundtables and "e-consultations" held in 2023.

This publication presents the results of this process in the field of higher education, with separate sections on strengths (highlighting good practices in the educational system for addressing equity and inclusion), challenges (identifying educational inequalities) and policy recommendations (with proposals of overall policy objectives, specific objectives and specific measures).


The target groups of this publication are primarily national institutions in Croatia in the field higher education, local and regional authorities and educational institutions that can incorporate these recommendations into their current and future educational reforms, programmes and initiatives. The publication will also be of value to all other local and international stakeholders in the field of education in Croatia (including researchers, educational experts, civil society organisations, media representatives and learners and their families themselves) to raise awareness of various possible ways to mitigate and, in the long run, prevent educational inequalities in Croatia.

2. METHODOLOGY FOR ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The policy recommendations presented in this publication are based on an in-depth analysis of educational inequalities at the level of higher education in Croatia. The data sources referenced in this analysis include both results of research conducted in the project by members of the Lifelong Learning for All Network, as well as previously available research, national documents and statistical data. In this analysis, the “problem tree method” was applied, which categorises identified problems in a hierarchy of cause-and-effect relations. Due to the complexity of the problem of educational inequalities, the Network’s members created a specially adapted problem-tree structure, as presented in the diagram below, and linked the research findings to different parts of the problem tree:



The first part of the Network's analytical framework is based on defining three **dimensions of equity and inclusion in education** and formulating indicators of educational inequality related to each dimension. Based on this framework, each problem identified by the Network through its research is then categorised into one of the dimensions.

Dimensions	Definition	Problem indicator
 Access	<p>This dimension relates to ensuring the conditions and removing barriers for individuals to access educational institutions or programmes that match their needs or educational objectives.</p> <p>The dimension requires the educational system to ensure availability, physical access and affordability of educational institutions/programmes. It also relates to ensuring equitable and inclusive admission procedures and encouraging the enrolment of learners from disadvantaged groups.</p>	<p>Low level of participation in education or in certain types of educational institutions/programmes</p>
 Well-being	<p>This dimension relates to ensuring an optimal experience for all learners in the educational system, leading to a comprehensive and balanced development of each individual's potential. In defining the concept of well-being, the Network has adopted the European Commission's definition of the concept of "well-being at school" in the context of the European Education Area (European Commission, n.d.), slightly adapting it in the context of lifelong learning. According to the adapted definition, well-being in the lifelong learning context means that all learners should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feel safe, appreciated and respected; • actively and purposefully engage in educational and social activities; • possess self-confidence and the feeling of autonomy and self-efficacy; • have supportive relationships with other learners and teaching staff; • feel that they belong to their educational community and are content with their experience in the educational process. <p>In the context of equity and inclusion, this dimension implies that the educational system fosters an equitable and inclusive environment in educational institutions, that equitable and inclusive teaching methods are applied and that appropriate material conditions are ensured for learners, especially those from disadvantaged groups.</p>	<p>Lack of a sense of belonging to one's educational community, lack of participation in educational or social activities, lack of supportive relationships, or negative experiences due to their disadvantaged status</p>
 Achievement	<p>This dimension relates to reducing the differences in educational achievements among different groups of learners, preventing early school leaving and stimulating further education after completing a programme.</p> <p>The dimension implies that the educational system entices recognising difficulties which some learners have in the educational process and providing adequate academic and social support in the educational process, especially for disadvantaged groups.</p>	<p>Low educational achievement, low probability of further pursuing education and/or early leaving from education</p>

Educational inequalities primarily stem from broader societal inequalities and their interaction with educational institutions and the educational system, which is why these two categories are listed as the **main factors and obstacles**. However, considering the complexity of educational inequalities and the need for a holistic understanding of how to prevent them, the analysis encompasses **broader factors and obstacles** which (directly or indirectly) may have a negative impact on equity and inclusion in education. The following categories of the broader factors are identified based on inductive analysis of stakeholders' attitudes on educational inequalities and analyses of other studies and documents.

Broader factors and obstacles	Types of challenges
Policy framework	Challenges in educational policies or other areas of public policy that directly or indirectly negatively impact equity and inclusion in education.
Organisational culture	Challenges related to norms, practices, management and networking among key institutions in the system (national/local authorities, educational institutions, etc.).
Societal values	Challenges related to the extent to which education, equity and inclusion are valued in society.
Individual factors	Challenges related to motivation, competences and educational choices of individuals. These factors are manifested in the context of broader societal factors (see below).
Other societal factors	Challenges related to broader socioeconomic and sociocultural factors and unequal distribution of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital.

The value of the Network's analytical framework is that it enables a comprehensive overview of a highly complex problem. The resulting "problem trees" present an innovative way to show connections between various factors and obstacles in a structured and simple way. More importantly, this framework clearly states that, although certain obstacles may be removed in the short- or medium term with specific measures, it is difficult to influence the broader factors, which require long-term, thorough changes not only in public policy, but also at a societal and individual level.

3. STRENGTHS AND GOOD PRACTICES IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Before focusing on problems and policy recommendations, it is important to acknowledge and recognise positive policies and practices in the educational system and to assess the potential of new and upcoming initiatives for enhancing equity and inclusion in higher education. In this section, we provide a summary of the strengths identified in the system and remarks on further options for improvement. The following sections will present the problem analysis and policy recommendations.

- **Croatia established a high-quality framework for enhancing the social dimension of higher education from 2014 to 2022**, which included the forming of a national working group, the adoption and implementation of the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education (Croatia is among the few countries in Europe with such a plan), the adoption of the “Methodology for Collecting Data on the Educational and Professional Pathways of Students according to their Social and Economic Status” and the publication of an analytical report on the experiences of disadvantaged groups in higher education. The national working group has drafted a new Plan of Measures for Enhancing the Social Dimension 2023-2025, which was adopted in June 2023.
- **Croatia has enhanced concrete higher education policies that contribute to the social dimension of higher education.** For example, state scholarships are now awarded based on socioeconomic status and have been significantly expanded with additional funding from the European Social Fund (which will be the case at least until 2027). In the first phase of funding agreements for higher education institutions (*programski ugovori*) (2012-2014), state scholarships were still awarded primarily on the basis of excellence, and the social dimension was included as only one of the possible indicators. Since then, socioeconomic status is the primary criterion. The new Act on Higher Education also includes the social dimension as one of key policy priorities and the Croatian quality assurance system in higher education also includes criteria related to the social dimension.

Despite this progress, the challenge of insufficient number of scholarships and scholarship amounts remains, just like challenges with the dynamics of their disbursement. Also, the social dimension is no longer as visible in the funding agreements and the impact of this measure has not been monitored.

- **Other features of the higher education system represent an important foundation for equity and inclusion.** For example, the policy of free first enrolment of studies removes a significant financial obstacle to access to higher education and the Croatian student financial support system facilitates access and participation of students through subsidised food and accommodation, provides the possibility of student work, and some measures give priority to disadvantaged students.

Despite these strengths, the linear tuition system in Croatia (a performance-based system for subsidising tuition fees, with a full subsidy in the first year and following years according to achieved ECTS points) applies only to full-time students and can create inequalities later during study. Losing full-time student status for disadvantaged groups poses a risk for continuation of their studies. The capacity of student dormitories remains a challenge and some groups do not have equal access to student financial support measures.

- **Support for students with disabilities has improved:** in the last decade, public higher education policies have emphasised the importance of providing support for students with disabilities, and many higher education institutions have established offices and/or support for students with disabilities.

Despite this progress, students with disabilities lack support in many aspects of access and participation in higher education (see problem analysis).

- **The Ministry of Science and Education is actively involved in monitoring and improving the social dimension.** Croatia is a part of the EUROSTUDENT and EUROGRADUATE research project, chairs the Bologna Group for the Social Dimension of Higher Education and is involved in the international projects SIDERAL and PLAR-u-PAGs for enhancing the social dimension, BWSE FOR2030 for enhancing inclusion and innovation in higher education and the SIRIUS 3.0 project for migrant education. The Ministry of Science and Education has also used EU funds for the development of the social dimension of higher education.
- **Higher education institutions have been establishing offices for academic and psychological support and counselling, which is particularly important for the successful participation of students from disadvantaged groups.** Many offices and services were established through an ESF project call for the development of the Croatian qualifications framework.

It remains to be seen how sustainable such services will remain following the ending of the initial funding period.

- **In the last decade, the Croatia has adopted a series of strategic documents and legal acts that emphasise the importance of the social dimension of higher education and improved numerous measures in the system in order to better contribute to this goal.**

4. CHALLENGES: ANALYSING EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES

This chapter presents a table summarising the educational inequalities identified in higher education. The analysis is followed by recommended objectives and measures to address these problems.

1. CENTRAL PROBLEM	
Educational inequalities at the level of higher education	
2. PROBLEM INDICATORS	
<i>Access</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower higher education attainment rate in Croatia (36.6% of population aged 25–34) compared to the EU average (40.5%) and the EU target by 2030 (45%) <i>Source:</i> European Commission (2021) • Certain disadvantaged groups have a lower rate of participation in higher education. Students of lower socioeconomic status are underrepresented; compared to other countries, the proportion of students who start higher education at over 21 years of age (7%) and student parents (4%) is low. <i>Source:</i> Eurostudent VII (2021a,b,c); Šćukanec et al. (2016) • Horizontal inequalities in the structure and profile of enrolled students by type of study, by institution and by study programme. Students of lower socioeconomic status are more likely to enrol in professional higher education institutions and are more represented at certain faculties. There are also significant horizontal and vertical differences in gender representation – e.g. female students are underrepresented in engineering, male students are underrepresented in the humanities. <i>Sources:</i> Puzić, Šabić & Odak,(2020); Puzić, Gregurović & Odak (2021), Šćukanec et al. (2016), Farnell et al. (2014) • Numerous other underrepresented and disadvantaged groups in higher education in Croatia have been identified. Students who are children of Croatian veterans, Roma students, LGBT students, students from alternative care, homeless students (or those at risk of homelessness), students from rural areas, small towns and islands, refugees and asylum seekers, student parents, students with disabilities, etc. <i>Sources:</i> Puzić et al. (2021), MSE (2019)
<i>Well-being</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certain study contexts and circumstances, which are not shared by all students, have a negative impact on the study experience. Certain circumstances such as paying tuition fees, part-time studying, working while studying, living in more expensive accommodation or inter-county commuting to attend university are all associated with greater financial burden, greater workload and greater dissatisfaction with the study experience. <i>Source:</i> MSE (2019), Šćukanec et al. (2016), Farnell et al. (2014) • Students who work while studying (44% of all students) are more exposed to a negative study experiences. Students who work are more often exposed to a greater financial burden, greater workload and a greater risk of dropping out of their studies. <i>Sources:</i> Eurostudent VII (2021), MSE (2019), Šćukanec et al. (2016), Farnell et al. (2014) • Certain socioeconomic, personal and family characteristics are associated with less a favourable study experience. Children of Croatian veterans, members of the Roma minority; LGBT students,

2. PROBLEM INDICATORS

	<p>students from alternative care, homeless students (or those at risk of homelessness), students from rural areas, small towns and islands, refugees and asylum seekers, student parents, students with disabilities, etc.</p> <p><u>Sources:</u> Odak et al. (2022.a,b.), Puzić et al. (2021), MZO (2019), Šćukanec et al. (2016), Farnell et al. (2014)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students of professional studies are more exposed to adverse study conditions. Students of public professional studies are more often faced with adverse study circumstances, such as part-time status and working while studying, and they have restricted access to dormitories and scholarships. Likewise, students of professional studies have a higher proportion of student parents and mature students. Students of state professional studies also assess their financial situation less favourably. <u>Source:</u> MSE (2016), Šćukanec et al. (2016), Farnell et al. (2014) • Newly identified vulnerable group: students with motivation problems, anxiety and depression during the COVID-19 pandemic. <u>Source:</u> Odak et al. (2022.a,b.); Doolan et al. (2021); Živčić Bećirević et al. (2021)
Achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A considerable proportion of students in Croatia drop out of higher education. Although administrative monitoring is not carried out, a recent comparison of the recorded number of newly enrolled students with those who graduated six years later indicates a dropout rate of 40-45% (Matković, 2023), which is slightly lower than the estimates for the first two decades of the transition, i.e. 40-50% (Matković, 2009), but still considerable. According to another analysis carried out within the framework of the network's activities (Matković, 2023) based on the Adult Education Survey (2016), a fifth (20%) of the population aged 25-39 who started their studies dropped out at the undergraduate level (18%) or graduate (2%) level. This rate is higher than the EU average (13.6%) and puts the relative frequency of dropping out of studies in Croatia in 7th place in the EU. The relative frequency of dropping out in Croatia is stable throughout all the observed age groups that completed their education in 1996-2016, but the absolute number increases with the increase in the number of students. According to another data source (Eurostudent V survey data), 15% of students temporarily interrupt their studies for at least one year (Šćukanec et al., 2016, pp. 121–124). • Disadvantaged groups are more at risk of dropping out, although the differences are less pronounced than in earlier educational cycles and can largely be explained by unequal earlier educational pathways. Students whose parents from expert or managerial professions are characterised by a significantly lower probability of dropping out of higher education, even after considering previous school success and student status, and support mechanisms such as scholarships and dormitory accommodation have been shown to contribute to a lower risk of dropping out (Matković et al., 2010, pp. 227–228). An analysis of the rate of completion of the first year of study among eight cohorts of a higher education institution (in the area of the social sciences) determined a higher risk of dropping out among children of parents without higher education and mature students, taking into account the determined higher completion rate of students who attended gymnasiums, had better secondary school results

2. PROBLEM INDICATORS

	<p>and were full-time students (Mihaljević Kosor, 2010, pp. 207–208). Even the temporary interruption of studies is more common among students from a lower socioeconomic background, student parents, but also full-time employees, part-time students or students at professional higher education institutions (Šćukanec et al., 2016, pp. 121–124). Parental education, employment and place of residence have not proved to be related to the intention to drop out or drop-out risk. On the other hand, factors such as type of secondary school attended, school performance and enrolment in a first-choice study programme, as well as the absence of need to work to finance one's studies, have all been shown to be protective factors regarding completion of studies (Šabić & Puzić, 2022).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • According to the analysis carried out in this project on drop-out risk in Croatia (Matković, 2023), the only statistically significant inequality regarding sociodemographic characteristics was for students whose parents have lower levels of education. More reliable estimates at the EU level also indicate slight inequalities at this phase of education, with advantages for female students and students whose parents have completed higher education, and with an increased risk for immigrants. • Horizontal inequalities in the higher education system result in significant differences in the positioning of graduates in the labour market. Enrolment patterns that show connections between the social background of students and their choices of types of institution and/or field of study further contribute to the perpetuation of existing social inequalities. <u>Sources:</u> Puzić, Gregurović & Odak (2021)
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3. MAIN FACTORS AND OBSTACLES

Educational system

<i>Access</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The three-year vocational education system does not allow direct access to higher education. The lack of general subjects in the curriculum of three-year schools and the non-existence of a state matriculation exam adapted to vocational programmes create significant obstacles for the transition from secondary to higher education for students who want to continue their education (since have attend a one-year bridging programme and take the state matriculation exam in general subjects). <u>Source:</u> Matkovic et al. (2013); Working Group on Higher Education of the Lifelong Learning for All Network • There are barriers for mature students who want to start higher education (especially those with lower qualifications). There is no system of recognition of prior learning, which means that mature students have to take the state matriculation exam, which also requires an additional adult education bridging programmes for preparation. <u>Source:</u> MSE (2019) • Barriers to access to higher education for migrants. Problems include recognition of diplomas from other countries and/or recognition of prior learning, as well as lack of access to the student financial support system and lack of access to information. <u>Source:</u> Puzić et al. (2021) • Newly identified group with difficulty of access: PhD students
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3. MAIN FACTORS AND OBSTACLES	
	Existing university regulations prevent students of professional higher education institutions direct access to doctoral studies. In addition, doctoral students who are not employed in science or higher education are hindered by the fact they must finance their doctoral studies by themselves. <u>Source: Odak et al. (2022.a, b.)</u>
<i>Well-being; achievement</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part-time studying generates higher costs and part-time students do not have access to financial support. The average semester cost for part-time studying is significantly higher than studying in full-time status, access to financial support (from family or from the education system) is low, and a relatively high proportion (37%) of part-time students works full-time. Part-time students do not have access to the student financial support available to full-time students (scholarships, accommodation in student dormitories, subsidised tuition fees for the first year of study). <u>Source: Puzić et al. (2021), Šćukanec et al. (2016), Farnell et al. (2014)</u> • Only 23% of students receive scholarships. However, the share of scholarships in students' income is low (approx. 10%), and students primarily depend on private funding (family as a source of income cited by 88% of students; work as a source of income cited by 27% of students). <u>Source: Odak et al. (2022.a, b.), World Bank (2019) MSE (2019)</u>
<i>In general</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of relevant and reliable data on disadvantaged groups, which are heterogeneous and subject to change. <u>Source: Odak et al. (2022.a, b.)</u>
Educational institutions	
<i>Access</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing architectural/physical barriers at higher education institutions for accessibility. <u>Source: Odak et al. (2022.a, b.)</u> • Admission policies at higher education institutions often do not include social dimension criteria. Two disadvantaged groups are often given priority status when enrolling in higher education institutions in Croatia: students parents are war veterans or are otherwise linked to the Homeland War and disabled students (who have been assessed as have a scale of disability of at least 60%). Although there are good practices whereby higher education institutions encourage the enrolment other categories of vulnerable and underrepresented groups (e.g. students with a lower percentage of physical disability or students from alternative care), such examples are still an exception and are not consistently applied in practice. <u>Source: MSE (n.d), ASHE (n.d)</u> • Higher education institutions encourage the enrolment of a quota of part-time students without adequate mechanisms to support the flexible studying, student well-being and the social dimension. <u>Source: MSE (2019)</u>
<i>Well-being</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inflexibility of higher education institutions in the implementation of part-time studies (e.g. scheduling and attendance requirements). <u>Source: MSE (2019)</u> • Lack of student services (academic, psychological and financial support). Depending on the institution, problems can include: (1) the lack of any student service office; (2) inadequate resources (human and other resources) of established offices; (3) inadequate recognition of existing

3. MAIN FACTORS AND OBSTACLES

	<p>student services. <u>Source:</u> Odak et al. (2022.a, b.), Puzić et al. (2021), Šćukanec et al. (2016).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient awareness by part of the academic staff about the problems related to the social dimension of higher education. <u>Source:</u> Puzić et al. (2021), MSE (2019) • Lack of teacher competences for working with disadvantaged groups. <u>Source:</u> Odak et al. (2022.a, b.), Puzić et al. (2021), MSE (2019) • Absence of systematic administrative monitoring of studying success or dropout rates in order to provide an analytical basis for targeted support during studies. <u>Source:</u> Odak, Baranović, Baketa (2023)
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4. BROADER FACTORS AND OBSTACLES

Public policy framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differences in access to student financial support and in study conditions of full-time and part-time students. <u>Source:</u> Odak et al. (2022.a, b.) • Insufficient sensitivity of regulations. The prescribed criteria for determining categories of students with disabilities are not sufficiently sensitive or clear. <u>Source:</u> Odak et al. (2022.a, b.)
Organisational culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of evaluation culture: a quality assurance and data collection system has already been implemented, but there are often no concrete guidelines based on the results of the evaluation. <u>Source:</u> Working Group for Higher Education • Insufficient interinstitutional cooperation: there is no harmonisation of regulations necessary to solve the problem of educational inequalities in higher education, e.g. for the exchange of information between higher education institutions (if a student enrolls in a study elsewhere) or even between different organisational units of a higher education institution (e.g. faculties, dormitories, career centres, psychological counseling). <u>Source:</u> Odak et al. (2022.a,b.) • The problem of determining and delimiting the competence of higher education institutions and other systems in providing support to students with disabilities. <u>Source:</u> Odak et al. (2022.a,b.)
Social values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of awareness of the social dimension of higher education among a wider range of stakeholders. <u>Source:</u> Working Group for Higher Education of the Lifelong Learning for All Network • Uneven ratio of merit-based and equity/inclusion criteria for awarding scholarships. <u>Source:</u> Working Group for Higher Education of the Lifelong Learning for All Network
Individual factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower achievements in earlier education largely determine the possibilities of enrolment and/or success in higher education, in terms of the probability of attending a certain type of secondary school, the probability of enrolling in one's first choice of study programme and the probability of having the competences for successful studying. <u>Source:</u> Puzić and Košutić (2015)

4. BROADER FACTORS AND OBSTACLES

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary students are generally poorly aware of their own plans or possibilities for enrolling in higher education. <u>Source:</u> Ristić Dedić & Jokić (2019) • Students in higher education are poorly informed about the existence of student support services. <u>Source:</u> Odak, Baranović, Baketa (2023) • Disinclination of students to use support services. <u>Source:</u> Odak, Baranović, Baketa (2023); Puzić et al. (2021) • Among the key factors for dropping out of studies are: loss of motivation to study, health and financial challenges, lack of self-discipline and individual or organisational challenges. <u>Source:</u> Odak, Baranović, Baketa (2023), Šabić & Puzić (2022)
Other social factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic, social and cultural capital of the family plays a decisive role in determining the educational pathways, decisions and achievements of individuals and consequently in the opportunity of starting and completing higher education. In this context, the possibilities of resolving educational inequalities at the level of higher education are limited. <u>Source:</u> Puzić & Košutić (2015) • Students from remote areas where study programmes are either not available and/or are difficult to reach and students from areas with poor information on study opportunities experience difficulties accessing higher education. <u>Source:</u> Odak et al. (2022.a, b.), Ristić Dedić & Jokić (2019)

5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: OBJECTIVES



In this section we propose recommendations in the form of overall and specific objectives of future public policies aimed at reducing educational inequalities in higher education in Croatia. The specific objectives are grouped into six thematic areas, based on a structure developed by the Lifelong Learning for All Network and which is applied to all educational levels (from early childhood education and care to higher education and adult education). In the next section we present recommendations of concrete policy measures to achieve those policy objectives.



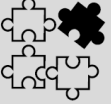

The recommendations are complementary with the **National Plan for the Development of the Education System until 2027**, as the Plan also identified educational inequalities as the key challenge to the educational system in Croatia. The mid-term vision of the plan is to make the educational system “inclusive, high-quality and equitable”. The recommendations can serve as an important resource in planning and implementing the measures for higher education suggested in the Plan and that the recommendations also complement Croatia’s new **Action Plan for Improving the Social Dimension of Higher Education for the period 2023-2025**.

Overall policy objectives

1. Increase the participation rate in higher education in Croatia, especially among disadvantaged and/or underrepresented groups
2. Reduce horizontal inequalities in the structure and profile of students by type of study, by institution and by study programme
3. Reduce the negative impact of adverse study circumstances on the student experience, especially for students from disadvantaged groups
4. Reduce the drop-out rate in Croatia, especially among disadvantaged groups

Specific policy objectives

Thematic area	Specific objectives
 <p>1. Policy framework</p>	<p>1.1. Sustain the existing national framework for systematically addressing the social dimension of higher education</p> <p>1.2. Provide a financial framework for enhancing the social dimension of higher education</p> <p>1.3. Include the social dimension in the criteria for accreditation and external evaluation of higher education institutions and science institutes for the period 2023-2027.</p> <p>1.4. Monitor and evaluate progress in the area of the social dimension of higher education</p>
 <p>2. Accessibility</p>	<p>2.1 Remove obstacles to higher education access for secondary students attending three-year vocational programmes</p> <p>2.2. Enable the enrolment of mature students (especially those with lower qualifications) through a system of recognition of prior learning</p> <p>2.3. Improve secondary students' awareness of different educational and career pathways</p>

	<p>2.4. Harmonise admissions policies of higher education institutions and include more social dimension criteria</p> <p>2.5. Ensure greater flexibility and inclusiveness of part-time studies</p>
 <p>3. Financial support</p>	<p>3.1. Remove financial obstacles to accessing and successful participation in higher education</p>
 <p>4. Support for students</p>	<p>4.1. Introduce a system for identifying and supporting students at risk of dropping out</p> <p>4.2. Improve student support services at universities (academic and psychological support) with a special emphasis on supporting disadvantaged students</p> <p>4.3. Improve support for students with disabilities to access, participate in and successfully complete higher education</p>
 <p>5. Support for teaching staff</p>	<p>5.1. Ensure better training of professional and academic staff for working with disadvantaged groups</p>
 <p>6. Inclusive institutions</p>	<p>6.1. Provide recognition of the additional workload of teaching staff working with student groups that have a higher proportion of disadvantaged students</p> <p>6.2. Strengthen measures and administrative procedures for inclusive higher education institutions</p>

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: MEASURES



1. Policy framework

Specific objective 1.1	Sustain the existing national framework for systematically addressing the social dimension of higher education
Measures¹ (short-term/ medium-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Place equity and inclusion in higher education among the priorities of the National Plan for the Development of the Education System 2023 - 2027. Systematic monitoring of the implementation of the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension in Higher Education 2023-2025.
Measures (long-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Systematic monitoring of the implementation and evaluation of the impacts of the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension in Higher Education 2023-2025
Stakeholders	MSE
NPDES reference	<i>Connect with NPRSO measure 5.3 (modernisation and relevance of study programmes)</i>

Specific objective 1.2	Provide a financial framework for enhancing the social dimension of higher education
Measures (short/medium term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the mechanisms of the European Social Fund for project financing of activities related to the social dimension of higher education Use funding agreements with higher education institutions to finance the activities proposed by these specific objectives
Stakeholders	MSE
NPDES reference	<i>Connect with NPDES measure 5.3 (modernisation and relevance of study programmes)</i>

¹ Short-term/medium-term measures refer to measures that could be adopted over a period of 2 to 4 years. Long-term measures refer to measures that could be adopted over a period of 5 to 10 years.

Specific objective 1.3	Include the social dimension in the criteria for accreditation and external evaluation of higher education institutions and science institutes for the period 2023-2027.
Measures (short-term/ medium-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include the social dimension as a separate standard for accreditation and external assessment of higher education institutions and science institutes for the period 2023-2027
Stakeholders	MSE, ASHE
NPDES reference	<i>Connect with NPDES measures 5.2. and 5.3. (quality assurance system and modernisation and relevance of study programmes)</i>

Specific objective 1.4	Monitor and evaluate progress in the area of the social dimension of higher education
Measures (short-term/ medium-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue Croatia's participation in the EUROSTUDENT survey for monitoring the social dimension of higher education • Publish reports on the implementation of the new National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension in Higher Education • Systematic collecting of data on dropout rates (see Recommendation 4.1.)
Stakeholders	MSE, higher education institutions
NPDES reference	<i>Connect with NPDES measures 5.2. and 5.3. (quality assurance system and modernisation and relevance of study programmes)</i>



2. Accessibility

Specific objective 2.1.	Remove obstacles to higher education access for secondary students attending three-year vocational programmes
Specific objective 2.2.	Enable the enrolment of mature students (especially those with lower qualifications) through a system of recognition of prior learning
Measures (short-term/ medium-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the structure and method of attending the one-year bridging programme necessary to take the state matriculation exam for students of three-year vocational programmes and for people of over 21 years of age² • Provide better counselling for 1st and 2nd year students in three-year secondary programmes on how to access higher education and the possibility of taking the bridging programme • Provide vouchers for potential students of the bridging programme as an incentive to continue education
Measures (long-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare and implement recognition of prior learning in higher education, enabling access to certain study programmes without taking the matriculation exam and/or by attaining a (partial) qualification based on prior learning outcomes through non-formal or informal learning
Stakeholders	MSE, vocational secondary schools, AVETAE
NPDES reference	<i>Connect with NPDES measures 2.8 (career guidance), 3.1 (curricular reform in vocational education), 4.1 (evaluation of prior learning), 4.6 (vouchers for adult education) and 5.3 (modernisation / relevance of study programmes)</i>

Specific objective 2.3.	Improve secondary students' awareness of different educational and career pathways
Measures (short-term/ medium-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish closer cooperation between "CISOK" centres (regional centres for information and advice on careers), employers and secondary schools for better informing and counselling of students on opportunities for accessing higher education and on career pathways; establish mobile teams or virtual guidance for secondary students in rural/remote areas • Establish closer cooperation between higher education institutions and secondary schools on opportunities for accessing higher education and on career pathways • Involve teachers and experts of secondary schools (school psychologists and/or other staff) in the process of counselling students on opportunities to access higher education and on career pathways

² For detailed information on proposed measures see "Additional notes" at the end of this section

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a national network for professional guidance and educational counselling at the secondary school level for a better exchange of experiences and good practices Design and implement a national programme of counselling students and their parents/guardians on the possibilities and benefits of enrolling in higher education
Measures (long-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve the processes of psychological and professional counselling in secondary education by encouraging an approach that combines personal interests and affinities with educational success and plans on higher education access and/or starting a career Establish a quality assurance system for guidance and educational counselling, including guidance impact monitoring systems
Stakeholders	MSE, MLPSFSP, secondary schools, civil society organisations, secondary school administrative bodies, Carnet
NPDES reference	<i>Connect with NPDES measures 2.8. and 5.3 (career guidance and modernisation and relevance of study programmes)</i>

Specific objective 2.4.	Harmonise admissions policies of higher education institutions and include more social dimension criteria
Measures (short-term/ medium-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and adopt national guidelines for equitable and inclusive enrolment policies of higher education institutions, with identified vulnerable and underrepresented groups in addition to recommended models (e.g. direct enrolment, extra points, enrolment priority or quotas for certain groups) Encourage higher education institutions on implementing guidelines for equitable and inclusive admission policies
Measures (long-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use funding agreements to encourage the implementation of guidelines for equitable and inclusive admission policies
Stakeholders	Higher education institutions, MSE
NPDES reference	<i>Connect with NPDES measure 5.3 (modernisation and relevance of study programmes)</i>

Specific objective 2.5	Ensure greater flexibility and inclusiveness of part-time studies
Measures (short-term/ medium-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adjust the conditions of part-time study in a way that enables the coordination of study and work obligations (e.g. in the evenings or at the weekends) and remote learning (virtual and hybrid options for students who live far from the higher education institution)
Measures (long-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regulate the system of part-time studying with proposed amendments and additions to the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Activity
Stakeholders	Higher education institutions, MSE
NPDES reference	<i>Connect with NPDES measures 5.3. (modernisation and relevance of study programmes), 10.1. and 10.6. (digital competence of institutions)</i>



3. Financial support

Specific objective 3.1	Remove financial obstacles to accessing and successful participation in higher education
Measures (short-term/ medium-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entitle part-time students to financial support under the same criteria as full-time students, with access to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ tuition fee subsidies ○ food, accommodation and transport subsidies ○ scholarships • Make reasonable adjustments to the criteria for tuition fee subsidies based on the number of attained ECTS credits for certain disadvantaged groups (e.g. for students from alternative care, for those who work while studying, etc.) • Improve the current state scholarship system: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ change the scholarship payment dynamics so that students receive the scholarship at the beginning of the academic year ○ increase the amount of scholarships in line with the increase in the cost of living and studying ○ increase the number of scholarships awarded • Provide better access to information on available scholarships • Set criteria related to the social dimension of higher education as part of the existing scholarship programmes at the level of local and regional self-government units instead of placing the emphasis on student excellence.
Stakeholders	MSE
NPDES reference	<i>Connect with NPDES measures 5.5., 5.6. (state scholarships), 5.7. (development of student accommodation infrastructure) and 5.3. (modernisation and relevance of study programmes)</i>



4. Support for learners

Specific objective 4.1.	Introduce a system for identifying and supporting students at risk of dropping out
Measures (short-term/ medium-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a methodology for systematic, integrated monitoring of the status, performance and graduating of students, both at the level of individual higher education institutions and at the national level • Record and actively monitor the status of enrolled students with the aim of identifying students at risk of dropping out (at the level of individual higher education institutions) • Establish a communication channel between higher education institutions and students at risk of dropping out on their intentions to continue, pause or terminate their studies, and on the availability of support and counselling on how to address possible challenges • Introduce a system of monitoring student enrolment status and risk of dropping out at national level
Stakeholders	Higher education institutions, MSE, ASHE
NPDES reference	<i>Connect with NPDES measures 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3. (ICT infrastructure, quality assurance and modernisation and relevance of study programmes)</i>

Specific objective 4.2.	Improve student support services at universities (academic and psychological support) with a special emphasis on supporting disadvantaged students
Measures (short-term/ medium-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professionalise psychological counselling at higher education institutions (and/or avoiding situations in which professors take on the role of psychological counsellors for their students) • Establish or strengthen mentoring systems at higher education institutions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ academic mentorship: introduce the function of an academic mentor/course adviser ○ student mentorship: promote peer support among students • Establish a national network connecting student support services and other units providing psychological counselling at higher education institutions • Adopt national guidelines for academic and psychological counselling at higher education institutions
Measures (long-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest more resources in the development of student services and their staff • Raise student awareness on the availability of student services and encouraging their use
Stakeholders	Higher education institutions, Croatian Student Union, MSE
NPDES reference	<i>Connect with NPDES measure 5.3 (modernisation and relevance of study programmes)</i>

Specific objective 4.3.	Improve support for students with disabilities to access, participate in and successfully complete higher education
Measures (short-term/ medium-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove architectural/physical barriers at higher education institutions for easier accessibility • Adjust the prescribed criteria regulating the status of students with disabilities • Improve the coordination of higher education institutions and other systems in providing support to students with disabilities
Stakeholders	MSE, Ombudsperson for Persons with Disabilities
NPDES reference	<i>Connect with NPDES measure 6.3. and 5.3. (system of support for students with disabilities, and modernisation and relevance of study programmes)</i>



5. Support for teaching staff

Specific objective 5.1.	Ensure better training of professional and academic staff for working with disadvantaged groups
Measures (short-term/ medium-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a guide for professional and academic staff on the social dimension of higher education, on disadvantaged groups and on procedures and ways of achieving reasonable adjustment • Organise and implementing training for the professional development of academic and professional staff on the social dimension of higher education • Organise regular national conferences on the social dimension of higher education for dissemination of information and exchange of experiences and good practices
Measures (long-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage social diversity of the staff at higher education institutions when implementing processes for recruiting new staff
Stakeholders	MSE, higher education institutions
NPDES reference	<i>Connect with NPDES measure 5.3 (modernisation and relevance of study programmes)</i>



6. Inclusive institutions

Specific objective 6.1	Provide recognition of the additional workload of teaching staff working with student groups that have a higher proportion of disadvantaged students
Measures (short-term/ medium-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise additional work through standardisation of such work in teaching • Recognise additional work through conditions for promotion to senior teaching positions
Measures (long-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systematic monitoring of personnel structure in higher education institutions that provide a larger number of study programs for students from disadvantaged groups and ensuring additional employment
Stakeholders	MSE, ASHE, higher education institutions
NPDES reference	<i>There are no related measures in NPDES. We propose adding these measures to new priorities and/or addressing them through other public policy mechanisms.</i>

Specific objective 6.2	Strengthen measures and administrative procedures for inclusive higher education institutions
Measures (short-term/ medium-term)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure flexibility of class attendance and administrative procedures for students from disadvantaged groups • Promote inclusion and active participation of student representatives in student, faculty and university bodies (e.g. by awarding ECTS credits) for monitoring the inclusiveness of the institution
Stakeholders	Higher education institutions, student unions and organisations
NPDES reference	<i>There are no related measures in NPDES. We propose adding these measures to new priorities and/or addressing them through other public policy mechanisms.</i>

Additional notes

Specific Objective 2.1. Remove obstacles to higher education access for secondary students attending three-year vocational programmes

The main measure could be the introduction of a unified and centrally coordinated programme at the national level, instead of individual programmes at the level of each educational institution. According to such a model, students could attend a bridging year at selected educational institutions in their community or surroundings. When planning and implementing the measure, it will be crucial to ensure the (local or regional) availability of these programmes and their accessibility in terms of timing (e.g., in the evenings for working individuals).

This measure is important not only for the access to higher education for secondary vocational students immediately after completing secondary education but also for individuals over 21 years of age who want to reintegrate into education. An open question would be what qualifications would be obtained during this bridging year if the programme is centralised and not linked to the school/previous programme and how to connect it with the Croatian Qualifications Framework.

Specific Objective 6.1. Provide recognition of the additional workload of teaching staff working with student groups that have a higher proportion of disadvantaged students

An additional dimension of support for teaching staff at higher education institutions should focus on recognising additional engagement in organising, implementing, and evaluating students in need of additional support during their studies. Namely, these are activities that can significantly increase the teaching workload during regular studies or accredited lifelong learning programmes (which teachers conduct on weekends). In order for work with students from disadvantaged backgrounds to be of higher quality, depending on the number of students, teachers will adjust the teaching process (e.g. repeat a taught subject in a foreign language; conduct classes outside of working hours - if students in disadvantaged status are enrolled as part-time students; adjust teaching methods or evaluation methods, such as exam time extension); provide bridging years or bridging exams before enrolling in a study programme, etc.

Teaching staff working in study groups with a higher proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds should have their teaching workload regulated in a different way (providing a higher coefficient for calculating the norm of hours) or teaching work in study groups with a higher proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds can be recognised as one of the activities within the selection for staff promotion and tenure.

APPENDIX: DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

The Lifelong Learning for All Network advocates for ensuring **every individual's** right to high-quality education throughout their entire life, resulting in a positive learning experience, a sense of well-being within their educational community, and ultimately educational outcomes that match each person's capacities.

The Network is particularly committed to providing individualised support to persons from **disadvantaged groups**. The Network defines disadvantaged groups as those at greater risk of unequal access to education, lower well-being during the educational process, and lower educational achievements due to circumstances or characteristics beyond their control. Examples of such circumstances and characteristics in a lifelong learning perspective (from early to adult age) are presented in the table below.

Circumstances and characteristics of disadvantaged groups in the context of lifelong learning (from early to adult age)

Social and family circumstances:	Individual characteristics:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socioeconomic status (low SES and poverty) • Place of residence (in rural, remote and isolated areas) • Membership of ethnic, linguistic and/or religious minorities • Status of refugee, migrant, or asylum-seeker; unaccompanied children; economic migrants • Challenging family circumstances (single-parent families; conflictual family relationships; parental deviant behaviour; familial abuse or neglect; etc.) • Children in alternative care • Exposure to exceptional circumstances such as natural disasters, wars, pandemics, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developmental risks and delays • Behavioural and/or mental health problems • Specific learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexia, dysgraphia, ADHD) • Developmental difficulties and disabilities (e.g. sensory impairments, intellectual disabilities, motor disorders, autism) • Chronic illnesses • Traumatic experiences (e.g. death of a parent) • Giftedness • LGBTIQ+ identity • Gender (which can result in unequal outcomes due to stereotypical gender roles)

Many circumstances and individual characteristics may intersect and, consequently, result in multiple dimensions of disadvantage (e.g. lower socioeconomic status, remote geographical location and challenging family circumstances).

The Network recommends terminological consistency in policy documents by using the term “disadvantaged groups” and by defining the term through a broad definition that considers exposure to various social circumstances and individual characteristics resulting in educational inequalities.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASHE – Agency for Science and Higher Education

AVETAE – Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education

EU – European Union

MLPSFSP – Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy

MSE – Ministry of Science and Education

NPDES – National Plan for the Development of the Education System until 2027

LIST OF NETWORK MEMBERS

Core members

1. Institute for the Development of Education: Thomas Farnell; Branislava Baranović; Dejana Bouillet; Sanja Brajković; Ana Skledar Matijević; Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt
2. Institute for Social Research in Zagreb: Nikola Baketa; Katarina Jaklin; Iris Marušić; Jelena Matić Bojić; Teo Matković; Iva Odak; Ivana Pikić Jugović; Saša Puzić; Josip Šabić
3. Forum for Freedom in Education: Jelena Perak; Eli Pijaca Plavšić
4. Academy for Political Development: Ivana Novoselec
5. Croatian Association for Early Childhood Intervention: Marina Šimanović
6. Public Open University Zagreb: Tihomir Žiljak
7. Nansen Dialogue Centre: Ivana Milas; Valentina Mikulić
8. Association of Cities in the Croatia: Lucija Jusup
9. Parents' Association "Step by Step": Matea Biloglav; Karmen Stipeč; Renato Vuk
10. Association for Development of Higher Education "Universitas": Vesna Kovač; Ivana Miočić
11. Individual member: Anka Kekez Koštro

Associated members

12. ICT-AAC Competence Network: Željka Car; Jasmina Ivšac-Pavliša
13. University Counselling Centre, University of Rijeka: Ivanka Živčić-Bećirević; Tamara Martinac Dorčić; Sandra Nuždić
14. Croatian Youth Network: Jovana Kepčija Pavlović
15. Croatian Andragogy Society: Dražen Maksimović; Siniša Kusić; Morana Koludrović; Anita Zovko
16. Human Rights House Zagreb: Tina Đaković
17. GOOD Initiative: Branimira Penić
18. Association ANCHOR: Katarina Turković Gulin; Nadina Đuretić; Endži Vrdoljak Skelin
19. "OKO" Association of Parents of Visually Impaired and Multi Disabilities Children: Nada Bjelčić; Željka Dostal Brašnić
20. Open Academy Step by Step: Bojana Gotlin; Marina Matešić
21. Croatian Union of Associations of Persons with Disabilities – SOIH: Marica Mirić; Kristina Peruničić; Martina Mokus; Ratmir Džanić
22. Ambidexter Club: Martina Horvat
23. Roma Resource Centre: Elizabet Takač; Jovana Petrović; Natalija Gašić
24. Individual members: Karin Doolan; Margareta Gregurović; Lelia Kiš-Glavaš; Dalida Rittossa; Ivana Dobrotić; Olja Družić Ljubotina; Tino Vodanović