

**BFUG Working Group on the Social Dimension: Collection of good practices in
Social Dimension implementation in Higher Education**

**Tempus project "*ACCESS: Towards Equitable and Transparent Access to Higher
Education in Croatia*"**

In 2010, Croatia embarked on a large international project which directly addresses the social dimension of higher education, by blending evidence-based planning of reform of the Croatian higher education funding system and its student financial aid system with a specific focus on equitable access to higher education.

The project, entitled "Towards Equitable and Transparent Access to Higher Education in Croatia", is a three-year project (2012-2012) funded by the European Commission through the Tempus IV programme. The project coordinator is Technische Universität Dresden (Germany) and the national coordinator of the project is the Institute for the Development of Education (Croatia) (www.iro.hr/en). The project was developed in close cooperation with the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, which also co-funds the project.

The ACCESS project focuses on the financial aspect of equitable access to higher education, and not on other factors influencing access, retention and completion of higher education. The goal of the project is to contribute to ensuring equitable and transparent access to higher education in Croatia by removing financial obstacles, improving data availability and building capacity for action. Specifically, the project has two main objectives: firstly, to collect data on social background and living conditions of students in Croatia and on the effectiveness and of higher education funding and student financial aid policies; and secondly to draft policy guidelines to enhance the equity-dimension and transparency of the higher education funding and student financial aid system in Croatia, which can be translated into amendments of laws and regulations.

Background of the project

Due to the lack of data in Croatia, before the project there were few indicators to assess the financial needs of students, the equity-dimension and effectiveness of the then higher education funding system, or the capacity of relevant institutions to adapt best-practice policy models from abroad. In its "Thematic Review of Tertiary Education – Country Note: Croatia" (2007), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) had noted this problem, stating that there was an "almost complete lack of information" to assess the equity-dimension of access to higher education in Croatia and therefore emphasised the "urgent need for better data, to enable an assessment of the effect of family income (on access to HE)" and that this should "be treated as a high priority for policy research and development".

At the same time, the limited data that was available in Croatia indicated that individuals from poorer backgrounds were underrepresented in higher education and that the current higher education funding and student financial aid system did not provide adequate mechanisms for ensuring equitable access to HE: again, the OECD confirmed in its report the equity issue of student funding being based largely on merit and not on need.

In order to contribute to equitable access to higher education in Croatia, the project has focused directly on the structural problem of financial obstacles to HE. Financial obstacles, however, are a key issue in Croatia, which had in the past seen a rise both of tuition fee levels and of the proportion of students who pay fees, without having clear regulations regarding criteria for setting tuition levels or for public funding of higher education institutions, and with few higher education institutions offering tuition waivers based on social background of students. Moreover, the rise of students' costs had not been followed by a review of the student financial aid system, which despite significant expenditures, did not target financial aid to those students most in need. This combination risked causing or aggravating inequities in access to higher education in Croatia.

Main project activities

The three main sets of activities of the ACCESS project are the following

- **Data collection:** The first major survey to be carried out within the project was the EUROSTUDENT survey, which took place for the first time in Croatia in 2010 and with over 4600 respondents became the largest student survey to be carried out in Croatia. The survey provides key data on the social and economic conditions of student life in Croatia and indicators of groups at risk of being disadvantaged in terms of finances or living conditions. In addition, two studies will be carried out to analyse the Croatian higher education funding system and student financial aid policies compared to other European countries, in order to assess the effectiveness and equity-dimension of current policies and to identify best-practices in Europe that could be applicable in the Croatian context.
- **Development of policy guidelines by experts:** based on collected data, national and international experts will draft policy recommendations for developing a modification of the higher education funding and student financial aid system adapted to the specific needs and capacities of Croatia.
- **Consultations with stakeholders:** Decision-makers from higher education institutions, together with other key stakeholders, will discuss and further develop the policy guidelines and wider consultations will take place with the academic community to discuss and legitimise the final policy guidelines.

In order to achieve the project goals, and to ensure that the policy guidelines are developed in the ACCESS project has a large Consortium (21 institutions in total), which gathers both renowned international experts and all key stakeholders from Croatia. At the international level, the ACCESS project has partners from 5 EU countries, including a senior expert from the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS), the former State Secretary for Higher Education from Slovenia and experts from Hungary, Austria and Sweden. At the national level, the Consortium includes representatives of universities and professional higher education institutions, students and state institutions, as well as experts from two research institutes and two NGOs.

The ACCESS project will result in high-quality, evidence-based guidelines on possible directions for the reform of higher education funding and the student financial aid system with specific emphasis on promoting equity in access to higher education. The minimum project outcome will be the publication of key data and analysis, as well as high-quality recommendations that will be available to policy makers and all stakeholders and higher



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education as a reference tool for issues relating to the financing of higher education and the social dimension of higher education – this will certainly be a tool for further policy making, lobbying and policy advocacy. The project will also produce recommendations which the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports and other stakeholders can work to include into the relevant laws and national policies.

Innovative aspects of project

ACCESS is the first and only national project in Croatia that directly deals with the issue of equitable access to higher education, and in this way the ACCESS project places the theme of the social dimension firmly onto the agenda of higher education reform in Croatia. This agenda-setting component of the project is highly significant in the Croatian context since this theme has until now has been largely absent from national policy debates. Additionally, by opening the theme of equitable access, the ACCESS project (which focuses only on financial aspects of access) provides a platform for discussing and planning a broader and more integrated approach to addressing equity and access issues, i.e. by focusing on other causes of inequities aside from financial factors.

The ACCESS project, by focusing on financial obstacles in HE, also ambitiously tackles one of the most complex and sensitive policy issues in HE: the funding of HE. In the Croatian context, this theme has been the subject of protests by students (against tuition fees) and of heated debates among the academic community due to the legal changes being currently discussed in Croatian higher education.

The ACCESS project is also innovative in practically implementing a policy-cycle approach in higher education reform, as well as evidence-based policy, both of which Croatia has only over the past several years been starting to use in its policy-making. The project is based precisely on these principles: to define the problem by collecting relevant data, to analyse possible policy solutions based on European models and practices and to draft policy recommendations based on expert analysis. Additionally, to ensure the impartiality of the recommendations and to foster inclusion of stakeholders, the project has a large Consortium of diverse institutions (with diverse agendas) and has also incorporated into its activities a range of additional stakeholder consultations.

We believe that this project, with the continued support both of the Croatian academic community representatives involved in the project and of the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, will represent an important step in ensuring that the social dimension becomes a central policy concern in Croatia's higher education system, and that it will provide the basis for major national policy reforms in Croatia. We also hope that the project can act as an example of good-practice in terms of promoting the policy-cycle approach to reform, evidence-based recommendations and stakeholder involvement, as well as blending higher education funding reforms with the social dimension of higher education.

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