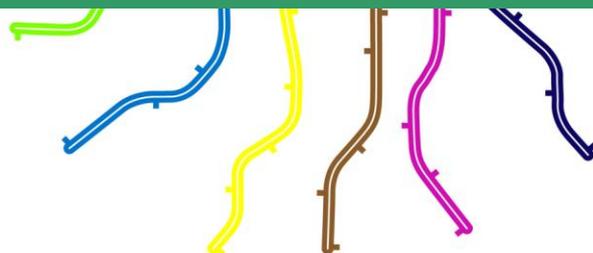


Guidelines for Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning in Croatia



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Introduction

This text is written in the form which combines a report and guidelines on recognition of prior learning (RPL) for Croatian higher education policy makers and higher education institutions, and is the result of the project "University Recognition of Prior Learning Centres – Bridging Higher Education with Vocational Education and Training" carried out in the framework of the Leonardo da Vinci Transfer of Innovation programme. The project was carried out in 2011-2013 by the Jagiellonian University (Poland), Université Paris-Est Créteil Val de Marne (France), Edinburgh Napier University (Great Britain) and the Institute for the Development of Education (Croatia). The text is based on research and publications produced within the project: "Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education – Challenges of Designing the System", "How to Establish and Operate and RPL Centre at a University" and "Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) – A Candidate's Guide".

The aim of the project was the transfer of innovation – solutions for the recognition of learning outcomes acquired outside formal education – from countries with a long tradition and mature RPL systems (France and Great Britain) to countries that have only just started to develop solutions in this area (Poland and Croatia).

This report aims at presenting an overview of the current status of Croatian higher education system, its needs and recognized benefits for introduction of RPL, primarily focusing on the aspect of social dimension in higher education.

1. Defining Recognition of Prior Learning

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a process that allows the identification, documentation, assessment and validation of learning outcomes achieved outside of formal education for example, through various forms of non-formal and informal education, work experience or development of own interests. On one hand, RPL supports personal and professional development and on the other it supports the development of human capital thus positively influencing the situation on the labour market. The focus of RPL is on learning outcomes not the learning process or the context where the learning took place. Therefore, generally speaking RPL enables a more flexible development of educational and career paths, faster completion of studies and provides an opportunity for self-realization in the context of life long learning.

With RPL, people who – for various reasons – have been unable to further their formal education at higher education institutions, have an opportunity to validate their skills and improve their chances on the labour market. RPL also benefits the employers who gain information about the degree of mastery of employees' skills by reference to higher education institution standards and the National Qualifications Framework. A variety of people can apply for RPL, including:

- adults returning to school;
- students who want to improve their existing skills;
- people wishing to retrain or change their career path;
- employees who have started education or training in their workplace;
- people who have gained skills and knowledge elsewhere e.g. through volunteering or working for their communities;

- repatriated people (returning from abroad), immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers who want to confirm their qualifications obtained in other countries;
- disabled persons who learned on an informal basis;
- persons who have acquired learning outcomes as a result of non-formal learning (training courses). (Jalocha, B. & Prawelska-Skrzypek, G. (2013), *Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) – A Candidate's Guide*)

1.1. RPL as an emerging trend in higher education

Owing to dynamic and rapid changes and needs of global societies modern higher education institutions are increasingly expanding the range of their services related to Lifelong Learning (LLL). New services related to lifelong learning, which are closely connected with RPL, enable higher education institutions to respond to the changing and evolving needs of learners. In understanding that learning takes place in a variety of contexts, not only in the traditional and formal school set-up, universities open themselves to new groups of potential students. In the modern day and age with its dynamic social transformation, including demographic changes, this approach may constitute a part of a new flexible strategy for the university. Using RPL, higher education institutions can improve cooperation with employers; RPL procedures can serve as a source of income diversification and grant the higher education institutions the opportunity to remain competitive and innovative in the international education market.

The vast majority of countries around the world, including Croatia, have already introduced qualifications frameworks as instruments based on learning outcomes that ensure more flexibility and mobility in education and on the labour market within and outside the country. Once the outcomes of informal and non-formal learning are fully recognised as potentially equivalent to the effects of formal learning, higher education institutions can make use of RPL to help learners in the formal validation of learning outcomes acquired outside the formal education system. To meet these challenges, higher education institutions must arrange administrative and

substantive support for these services, as well as provide an overall quality of supervision.

This new feature entails providing educational services of a new kind. They are based on establishing, on the basis of clear evidence and following an implementation of unambiguous procedures, whether and to what extent an adult who has not completed a formal education process, has indeed mastered specific learning outcomes pertaining to the specific process of formal education. These effects may relate to different curricula, modules and educational disciplines fostered at the given university. For a competent coordination of the implementation of these specific services related to lifelong learning (LLL), institutions usually establish separate organisational units which deal exclusively with RPL (RPL Centres) or the overall university activities pertaining to LLL (LLL centres). (Jalocha, B. & Prawelska-Skrzypek, G., The Challenges of designing and Managing a University RPL Centre, in: *Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education – Challenges of Designing the System*)

1.2. RPL as a new education service at universities¹

When creating an RPL centre at a higher education institution, one should consider its organisation, including its location within the structure, the division of roles played in the process and the financing method. RPL procedures should be planned and drafted with due care, so as to ensure accessibility and transparency which are the key elements in the integrity of the entire process. RPL as a new service does not involve only the confirmation of competence; it also encompasses the process of education and learning. Participants in such a process learn to run self-assessment and receive guidance on how to further develop their competences.

¹ Quoted from: Jalocha, B. & Prawelska-Skrzypek, G. (2013), *How to Establish and Operate and RPL Centre at a University*

In order to successfully start the RPL process, a university must apply the following assumptions:

- There is no difference between specific learning outcomes achieved in and outside of university. RPL is an important method of recognizing learning outcomes, regardless of the context in which the learning took place.
- The processes, procedures, practices and all decisions regarding RPL at a university should be fair, clear, reliable and available to everyone interested.
- RPL is a voluntary process, focused on the learner (Candidate). The Candidate should receive guidance and support in the process of RPL, both before submission and during the assessment of the evidence of prior learning.
- The RPL evaluation process must be course to the same quality assurance systems as any other form of services/activities carried out at a university.
- Assessment methods used in RPL must in their standard and rigour be equivalent to all other methods applied at a university, while remaining consistent with the course of the assessment (learning outcomes).
- The obligation to prepare evidence of learning outcomes lies with the Candidate.

To be able to run an effective RPL process, universities establish divisions in their structures, responsible for RPL procedures. These divisions have different names, depending on their functions and the origins of their creation within university structures, but they do share a common purpose: implementation of RPL processes. Such centres often serve as Lifelong Learning (LLL) facilities, whose tasks include the conduct of RPL procedures.

The main goal of educational services in the field of RPL is to determine on the basis of clear evidence and under clear procedures, whether and to what extent an adult, who has not completed formal education, mastered the specific effects of learning characteristic of the specific process of formal education. These effects may relate to

different programmes, modules and fields of study carried out at a particular higher education institution.

The experience of other countries shows that RPL Centres are the result of decisions taken by university authorities or the projects implemented in relation to LLL and RPL. The main reason why universities create RPL centres is the fact that delegating the coordination of RPL processes to a single separate unit makes it easier to manage the support of these processes throughout the entire university. It is also important to create appropriate conditions for managing the process of quality assurance in RPL services in the university's internal systems. A university willing to create an RPL centre in its structure must:

- Hire/redirect administrative staff with the right skills to work in the centre
- Develop RPL procedures that are optimal for the university, in accordance with the university's internal standards as well as the applicable national law, taking into consideration the principles set out in the recommendations of the Council of Europe
- Incorporate the recognition process into the university's quality assurance policy
- Recruit specialists from different fields among the academic personnel and train them: all areas of learning, where the university wants to pursue RPL procedures must have assigned assessors
- Provide professional advisors on professional/educational balance, who would help prepare a portfolio and identify the areas of convergence between the effects acquired outside the university and those acquired during the educational process inside it
- Provide complete and comprehensive information on RPL opportunities at the university.

1.3. RPL in Croatian higher education

RPL in higher education in Croatia has so far been dependent on initiatives of very few individual higher education institutions, or even faculties or study programmes. However, just recently a legislative framework for the development and implementation of RPL in Croatia has been set by the Law on Croatian Qualifications Framework (CROQF), which has been passed by the Croatian Parliament in February 2013 and came into force on 2 March 2013 (Official Gazette 22/13).

The Law on CROQF recognizes that acquisition of learning outcomes is not achieved exclusively through formal pathways, but through all other non-formal and informal paths, which should be validated. In order to ensure the quality and transparency of the CROQF implementation, the CROQF Registry is currently being developed with the aim to ensure better links between education and labour market needs. The CROQF Registry will list all occupations with the accompanying competences, and the competences or learning outcomes will be linked to particular qualifications. According to the Law on CROQF, a Rule Book on CROQF Registry should be published till the end of 2013 and within a year after the Law is passed (in 2014) the Rule Book on validation of non-formal and informal learning should also be published, thus ensuring a legal framework for RPL in Croatia.

The mentioned Law and Rule Book on validation of non-formal and informal learning will certainly offer guidance and motivate more higher education institutions to prioritize their RPL strategies and activities. Having in mind this early stage of development of RPL in higher education in Croatia it is of utmost importance that critical factors in the economic and social context, stakeholder and institutional framework and the education and training policy are taken into account, which would in turn ensure a strategic approach to the development of RPL policy and procedures. Development of the system of RPL provides an opportunity to address the issue of interaction between society and higher education on one hand and structural issues within the higher education system on the other.

1.4. References

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2. Overview of Croatian Higher Education System²

2.1. Size of Higher Education System: Institutions

Croatia's Higher Education (HE) system is regulated on the national level, and has been under intensive reforms since 2003, driven by the Bologna Process, which Croatia joined in 2001. The system is primarily regulated by the 2003 Act on Scientific Activity and HE which established a binary system. Professional studies are offered in polytechnics, schools of professional HE and, exceptionally, universities. Academic studies are offered exclusively in universities. Teaching and research is carried out by one of the following constituent university units: Faculties, university departments, art academies or university institutes. Faculties and academies are parts of universities, but legally recognized as separate and independent legal entities (EACEA, 2010).

2.1.1. Trends in Higher Education

Table 1. Size of the higher education system (January 2013)

	Public	Private	Total
Number of non-university/vocational/professional HE institutions:			
Polytechnics	12	3	15
Schools of professional higher education	3	25	28
Total	15	28	43
Number of universities:			
Universities	7	3	10
Faculties	61	0	61
Art academies	6	0	6

Source: Agency for Science and Higher Education

² This overview is based on the report Šćukanec, N. (2013). Overview of Higher Education and Research Systems in the Western Balkans: Country Report - Croatia.

In 2012 the share of population aged 30-34 with tertiary education was 24.3%, while the EU average was 35%. Croatian HE used to be concentrated at the major traditional universities Zagreb, Split, Osijek, and Rijeka, but in the past 10 years new public universities have been established: Zadar 2002, Dubrovnik 2003, and Pula 2006. The traditional universities are not functionally integrated, but the recently founded ones are.

The incentive for polycentric development of HE has continued in Croatia since 2007, with the MSES to support the establishment and development of professional study programs outside of traditional HE centres. Despite polycentric development, study opportunities are primarily located around the capital Zagreb. Even though institutions are now distributed across the whole country, the University of Zagreb offers the most diverse study programs, enrolling about 50% of the overall student population.

Private and public HE institutions are treated equally, which means that the same quality assurance mechanisms apply. The number of private HE institutions and programs has grown since 2003, but primarily in the professional studies sector. Private HE institutions currently enrol less than 10% of all students, but enrolment rates are increasing (EACEA, 2010). Croatia has three private universities. The number of students attending these universities is below 1% of all students enrolled in university studies (Dataset of the EUROSTUDENT survey, 2010).

2.1.2. Organization of Higher Education

The Bologna driven reform of study programs began in 2005, introducing undergraduate and graduate programs (first and second cycle). The majority of HE institutions transformed the previous four-year programs into the 3+2 Bologna model. Only a few kept the 4+1 model, and some adopted integrated programs, such as Law (5+0) or Medicine (6+0). Postgraduate programs were also restructured (EACEA, 2010).

As of January 2013 Croatian HE institutions offered 1,334 study programs, an increase of 63% over 2005, or of more than 230% over the offer before 2005.

Introducing the new degree structure has led to a significant geographically and scientifically unbalanced increase in total number of study programs. The vast majority is now concentrated in the social sciences (369) and humanities (239), accounting for 46% of the total of 1,334. Of all study programs, 643 or 48% are concentrated in Zagreb (MOZVAG database).

The 2007 Act on Academic and Professional Titles and Academic Degree established a system of degrees for students graduating from Bologna study programs and a framework for comparison of pre-Bologna and Bologna titles. Academic degree courses are organized according to the system of transferable ECTS credits and have the three cycles - undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate. Professional degree courses also award ECTS credits, but are organized in two cycles (EACEA, 2010).

Qualifications

Universities issue both academic and professional degrees, while other higher education institutions issue professional degrees only. Only universities can implement third cycle education. The binary system is still not fully implemented because of the reluctance of universities to surrender professional studies, mainly because of the revenues gained from these studies (NCHE, 2011b).

All first cycle qualifications give access to the second cycle, but the universities determine the conditions for admission to their second cycle programs. All second cycle university qualifications give access to the third cycle, but holders of second cycle professional qualifications have to pass additional courses and examinations to prepare them for participation in a research study program. The percentage of second cycle qualifications that give direct access to the third cycle is 85% (EACEA, 2010). According to the 2010 Eurostudent survey in Croatia, 71% of the university students of the first cycle intend to continue to the second cycle studies. In professional HE 38% of students in the first cycle plan to continue to the second cycle professional studies (Cvitan et al., 2011:42).

Curriculum

According to the 2003 Act on Science and HE, the HE institutions are autonomous in determining contents and teaching methods of their study programs. The Act stipulates the curricula to be in line with the latest scientific achievements, national priorities, professional demands and comparable EU curricula. The 2009 Act on Quality Assurance in Science and HE gives autonomy to the senates of the public universities to approve their own study programs, while study programs of all other HE institutions must pass the initial accreditation by the ASHE for approval.

Admission

Admissions to HE are regulated in the Act on Science and HE and are set individually by each HE institution. They can, for example, individually decide on admission quota or on weights placed on secondary school grades, grades of the recently introduced state level graduation exam at the end of secondary schooling or on recognition of prior learning in the admissions procedure. Since 2010/11, the technical aspects of admission to HE institutions are managed by the Central Application Office through a web portal, which is a part of the ASHE (EACEA, 2010).

Completion Rate

Although no official data on completion rates is published in Croatia, Matković (2009:) estimates that the completion rate in Croatia was 59% for the generation that graduated in 2007. These estimates correspond to the findings of the UNDP survey which confirms that 59% of enrolled students successfully finished their studies, while 41% dropped-out, mostly in early years of study (UNDP, 2008:39). Increasing the completion rate is a declared policy goal of the MSES, and the major incentives are the complete coverage of tuition fees for students studying in regular manner at public HE institutions, plus incentives through scholarships (EHEA, 2012:24).

2.1.3. Mobility

The data about international and national mobility in HE is rather scarce in Croatia. A comprehensive database or monitoring system for mobility data does not exist.

According to the UIS Database, Croatia's outbound student mobility ratio was 4.9% in 2009 (6,792 students), while the median outbound mobility ratio in Europe was 3.6%. The figures show a very slow increase from 2006, which suggests that the new Bologna structure has not significantly improved to vertical mobility or degree mobility.

On the other side, according to Eurostudent survey (Cvitan et al., 2011) only 2,972 students or 2% of all Croatian students participated in international exchange programs in 2009/10. The European average is around 8%, which means that the short term or horizontal mobility was rather low before 2010. However, in 2011 Croatia became a full member of the EU Lifelong Learning Program, with Erasmus as the flagship HE exchange program. Since then the short term mobility in HE has been increasing rapidly: from 2010/11 to 2012/13, outgoing student numbers have grown from 545 to 1,317, and incoming from 333 to 600.³

Therefore, the Bologna degree structure was an important prerequisite for massive participation in the structured EU exchange mobility programs, and the combined effect of the two has contributed significantly to the increase of the short term outgoing and incoming mobility in HE. The MSES has indicated that recognition and curriculum/study organization are the most significant obstacles for outgoing student mobility, while language is the major obstacle for incoming students (EHEA, 2012). The consequence is that the Bologna degree structure must be further improved, and that incoming mobility depends on number of programs offered in foreign languages. The imbalance between outgoing and incoming students is likely to remain challenging.

³ Data from the AMPEU.

The mobility of students inside Croatia is hampered by unequal duration of study programs at different institutions. Professional HE students usually need to pass additional courses and examinations when transferring into university programs, which is a further obstacle for the mobility between universities and professional HE institutions. Despite the lack of official data, these obstacles possibly indicate relatively low mobility within the country and between institutions. **Low in-country mobility could have both positive and negative implications on the RPL: RPL could help overcome structural barriers between institutions, but the existent barriers and structural differences could also negatively influence the implementation of the RPL practices at Croatian HE institutions.**

2.2. Size of the Higher Education System: Students

The majority of Croatian students are enrolled at public HE institutions (93%). Only 7% study at private HE institutions (data for 2010; Cvitan et al., 2011). In 2011/12, 78% studied at universities, and 22% at professional HE institutions. Of a total of 152.857 students, 74% (112,848) were enrolled as full-time and 26% (40,009) part-time students (CBS, 2012a). Of all first and second cycle students in 2010/11, 38% students were enrolled in undergraduate university studies, 13% in graduate university studies, 16% in integrated undergraduate and graduate university studies, 30% in undergraduate professional studies, and 3% in specialist professional graduate studies (CBS, 2012b).

Table 2. Number of tertiary education students at ISCED 5 and ISCED 6 levels

Year	Students ISCED 5	Students ISCED 6	Total number of students
2007/08	138,126	3,052	141,178
2008/09	134,188	3,102	137,290
2009/10	145,263	3,072	148,335
2010/11	148,616	3,451	152,067
2011/12	152,857	3,235*	156,092
(Estimated) increase in total number of students 2007/08-2011/12	14,731	183	14,914

Source: CBS (2008-2012); * Source for this single figure: CBS (2012c)

Table 3. Number of students in the system at ISCED 5A and ISCED 5B levels

	Professional HE	University HE			Total Professional and University HE
		University studies at universities	Professional studies at universities	Total University HE	
2007/08	25,789	94,796	17,541	112,337	138,126
2008/09	26,674	90,294	17,220	107,514	134,188
2009/10	31,061	97,936	16,266	114,202	145,263
2010/11	33,661	99,377	15,578	114,955	148,616
2011/12	33,881	103,316	15,660	118,976	152,857
(Estimated) increases 2007/08-2011/12	8,092	8,520	-1,881	6,639	14,731

Source: CBS (2008-2012)

Demographic indicators show population decline and ageing, diminishing younger, education-oriented age groups. The size of the education-relevant age groups in the 2010-2020 decade will have decreased by 14% in comparison to the previous decade (CBS, 2008-2012). Demographic decline could significantly decrease the

number of student enrolments in HE, which could have negative organizational and fiscal implications on HE institutions. Introduction of the RPL procedures at HE institutions could help increasing the student enrolments.

The overall first year student enrolment in HE institutions in 2011/12 was 59,968 (CBS, 2012a). In the long run, the negative demographic trends could curb further expansion of the higher education system: The cohort of 18-year-olds is expected to decrease to 40,300 in 2024/25 (Babić et al., 2006:38).

2.3. Funding of Higher Education

2.3.1. State Funding for Higher Education Institutions

The 2003 Act on Scientific Activity and HE delegated admission quotas and tuition fee levels and payment schemes to the universities and introduced lump sum financing, allowing HE institutions to allocate received funds independently. Sources of funding of Croatian HE institutions according to the Act are founders' funds, state budget via the MSES, local authorities funding, Croatian Science Foundation project-based funding, institutions' own funds, and donors. Table 4 shows the level of total investment into the education which is low in comparison with EU27 of 5,5% of GDP for 2010. Croatian public investment in HE is also low in comparison with EU27 of 1,22% of GDP for 2009, while Croatian private investment in HE is relatively high in European terms but still below EU27 of 0,39% of GDP for 2009.

Table 4. Level of investment into the higher education system as % of GDP

Year	Total investment in education	Public investment in higher education	Private investment in higher education
2008	4,6	0,94	0,26
2009	4,7	0,82	0,28
2010	4,5	0,78	0,22
2011	n/a	n/a	n/a
2012	n/a	n/a	n/a

Source: Eurostat (2012)

Public HE institutions receive base funding according to a historical allocation system, which remains unchanged compared to previous years. There is no differentiation according to the field of study or particular study programs.

A positive new development in the academic year 2012/13 has been the introduction of pilot scheme for three year funding agreements between the state and public HE institutions. These agreements introduce for the first time performance indicators, allowing institutions to receive additional funding if they meet specific policy objectives. Indicators are for example related to the social dimension of HE through fostering access of under-represented groups and of mature students, or related to a reduction of drop-out rates. **Performance base funding could also be used to encourage universities to introduce the RPL procedures and increase the number of students entering HE through RPL procedures.**

In addition public HE institutions receive tuition fee subsidies for their students according to recent government decree (Government of Croatia, 2012). The state will pay HE institutions for all full-time undergraduate and graduate students at public HE institutions who enrol for the first time in their first year of studies. The state will continue to pay for these students in the following years only if they have accumulated a minimum of 55 ECTS credits in the previous year of study, with 60 credits being the full annual course load. Students who do not meet these requirements pay tuition fees according to a linear model, whereby the levels of fees are variable and increase proportionally to the number of ECTS credits that students

are short of the 55 credit target. The MSES expects that with the new tuition fee policy a more students will be able to study without paying fees.

2.3.2. Categories of Own-income Funding for Higher Education Institutions

Depending on the university, public funding represents between 69-92% of the total funding of the public universities and the remaining percentage represents own income. Dolenc et al. (2012) mentions four major categories of own income for public universities:

- Tuition fees,
- Research and development project grants, from international, e.g. EU, or domestic sources, e.g. MSES, Croatian Science Foundation,
- Commercial capitalization of resources, all permissible income-generating activities of a HE institution, include income from real estate transactions, delivering expert services, or non-degree courses,
- Other sources, like administrative charges to students beyond tuition, publishing fees, student employment overheads and donations.

More than half of own income is generated by tuition fees at universities. Tuition fees are also a major form of own income for polytechnics and schools of professional HE who have higher percentage of own income in comparison with universities (Dolenc et al., 2012). HE institutions are autonomous in allocating their own income, following their statutes. **RPL services could represent additional source of income for HE institutions.**

2.3.3. Student Costs and their Source of Funding

Cost-sharing in Higher Education

Over the past two decades the state policy on HE financing has shifted from predominantly state supported towards students' own contributions. In 2010/11 only 49% of students do not pay tuition fees (Babić et al., 2006:50; CBS, 2012b). Part-time students and postgraduate students always pay tuition fees and do not receive any benefits provided by the state student welfare system. In 2010/11 besides the 49% tuition-exempt full-time students, 26% are full-time tuition paying students, and 25% are part-time tuition paying students. There are many more fee paying students enrolled in professional HE as opposed to those enrolled in university HE.

Table10. Payment of tuition fees, and proportion of students paying (2011/12)

	Professional HE (%)	University HE (%)		
		Total university HE	Students of professional studies at universities	Students of university studies at universities
Undergraduate	65,44	48,87	65,43	44,58
Masters	96,01	23,94	88,50	21,10
Integrated	n/a	42,34	n/a	42,34
PhD	n/a	86,26*	n/a	86,26*

Source: Author's calculation based on data from MSES's BRSTUD database. *Source for this single figure: CBS (2012b) for year 2010/11

Costs of Studying⁴

According to Eurostudent survey conducted in Croatia in June 2010, the average total cost of studies in Croatia amounts to EUR 4,200 per year. This includes direct and indirect costs of studying. Direct costs are tuition and other study related fees, adding up to an average of EUR 750 per year. Indirect costs are living expenses, amounting to EUR 3,450 per year. Not all student costs fall within the average, and there is considerable dispersion among the respondents (Cvitan et al., 2011).

HE institutions are autonomous in determining their tuition fees. Tuition-exempt students spend an average of only EUR 100 on various fees per year. Tuition-paying students, both full- and part-time, spend an average of EUR 1,174 on tuition fees per year. Students of private HE institutions, of professional HE studies, part-time students, students with children, and students that live in homes they own show the highest total costs of studies (Cvitan et al., 2011).

The range of annual tuition fees at professional HE institutions is wide. While the vast majority of polytechnics are public institutions charging lower fees, the schools of professional HE are predominantly private and charge higher fees, ranging between EUR 1,500 and 15,000 per year (EACEA, 2010).

Table 11. What is the range of tuition fees in EUR? (2011)

	Professional HE	University HE
Undergraduate	400-5.227	267-1.334
Masters	400-5.227	267-1.334
Integrated	n/a	267-1.334
PhD	n/a	934-8.000

Source: Dolenc et al. (2012) and calculations by the author based on the data from Dolenc et al. (2012:74-82). Shown are minimum and maximum amounts. The study of Dolenc et al. does not contain second-cycle tuition. On the basis of 2012/13 current calls for enrolment, however, it seems a valid assumption to assume the same price ranges for second-cycle as for first-cycle studies.

⁴ The exchange rate of the Croatian Kuna to the Euro is approximately the following: EUR 1 = HRK 7,5

The system of student welfare financed by the state includes all full-time students who receive a food subsidy, health insurance, tax exemption on student employment, subsidy for private accommodation, tax relief on student parents' income. In addition, most full-time students in Croatia have full or substantial subsidies for local transportation costs funded by the local communities. Students who live in student dormitories pay subsidized price for their housing. There are also annual state grants available for several student categories: Exceptional students, students of lower socio-economic status, and students with disabilities (EACEA, 2010).

It is to be expected that potential candidates for the RPL in HE will be among employed population who will be interested for the part time status at HE institutions. Both government and HE institutions should redefine the present status of part time students and give them equal rights as for full time students in order to secure successful completion of studies for students enrolled through the RPL.

2.4. Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Quality assurance is regulated by the 2009 Act on Quality Assurance in HE and Science. According to the Act and corresponding directives, HE institutions are required to develop internal quality assurance systems. Internal quality assurance is provided by the institutions' internal quality assurance systems in the form of internal checks. Study programs delivered at public universities are self-accredited by university senates, while programs delivered by all other public and private HE institutions are accredited by the ASHE.

ASHE is a public institution established in 2004, which independently performs tasks within its competences and purview as defined by the 2003 Act on Scientific Activity and HE, the 2003 Act on Recognition of Foreign Educational Qualifications, and the 2009 Act on Quality Assurance in Science and HE. ASHE is the only national agency responsible for external evaluation of HE institutions, study programs and scientific organizations through:

- Initial accreditation of new HE institutions, new study programs and new research activity,
- Reaccreditation of existing HE institutions and of existing research organizations every 5 years,
- Audit (review of internal quality assurance systems) of existing HE institutions and of existing research organizations,
- Thematic evaluation of whole institution, part of an institution, or study program at a HE or research institution.

The ASHE in its external quality procedures of HE institutions performs also external quality assessments of teaching indirectly. This is pertinent in case of reaccreditation, because most standards that are evaluated, particularly HE institution management, Study programs, Students, Teachers, contain criteria which include teaching assessment.

The ASHE is autonomous and independent, and is obliged by law to respect European Standards and Guidelines as well as international practice in the field of quality assurance in science and HE. The implementation of the evaluations, methods used, members of the evaluation panels, timetables and other evaluation issues, report recommendations and conclusions cannot be influenced by other stakeholders, such as HE institutions or ministries. In 2011 the ASHE gained full ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) membership, and was included in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). **The prerequisite of successful RPL is the functional and reliable external and internal quality assurance system. Croatia has not decided yet on the approach to RPL quality assurance mechanisms – it can be regulated by the state or left to the market mechanisms with the open competition between RPL providers. If the quality assurance of RPL procedures is going to be regulated by the state, the ASHE may act as a responsible implementing body integrating RPL quality assurance among its procedures.**

2.5. Major Challenges in Higher Education

The major challenges facing the HE system in the near to mid-term are the structural reform of universities, the reform of the financing system for HE, assurance of equitable access to HE, and the continuation of curricular reforms alongside the implementation of the Croatian Qualifications Framework (EACEA, 2010). The role of students is to be strengthened at all institutional levels.

Currently Croatia does not have a comprehensive education strategy, because there was no successor to the strategic document Education Sector Development Plan 2005–2010 (MSES, 2005), much less a HE strategy. The new government elected in December 2011 has initiated the development of new strategic documents in order to set the quality framework for science, technology, innovation and HE system in Croatia. In 2012 the government published the Guidelines for Strategy of Teaching, Education, Science and Technology, which should result in the first comprehensive national strategy for science and all levels of education by end of 2013.

Croatia's significant demographic challenges have started to affect education. Demographic decline will have fiscal and organizational implications, but it also means that the decreasing number of active workers will need to increase their productivity in order to ensure that Croatia's revenues will meet increasing expenses, for example with regard to pensions and long-term care. Education is crucial to raising competitiveness and productivity of the labour force. Croatia needs to both increase HE participation and significantly increase completion rates to catch up with OECD peers and meet the Europe 2020 goals (World Bank, 2012). Introduction of RPL procedures in HE could have positive impact on the increase of HE participation.

A major obstacle to policy development is the lack of data, which means there is no support for strategic evidence-based decision making. Central data management is not working and data is fragmented among different institutions, or does not exist at all. The legal framework needs to be improved, because it currently prevents data integration and there is a need for a comprehensive HE information system.

The efficient and effective use of HE institutions' resources is limited by weak governance structures which need improvement. Historically, the largest public universities are loose associations of legally independent faculties, but serve over 70 % of the student body. According to OECD (MSES, 2007) and World Bank (2009, 2012) reports, this governance model hampers system reforms and decreases responsiveness to the needs of society.

Another major task is the HE curriculum reform, including the implementation and linking of the learning outcomes with student workload, allocation of ECTS credits (EACEA, 2010). This task overlaps with the implementation of the Law on Croatian Qualifications Framework (CQF), which will have a positive impact on the implementation of RPL at HE institutions.

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2.7. Abbreviations

AMPEU	Agency for Mobility and EU Programs
ASHE	Agency for Science and Higher Education
CBS	Croatian Bureau of Statistics
ECTS	European Credit Transfer System
FTE	Full Time Equivalent
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HE	Higher Education
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
MSES	Ministry of Science, Education and Sports
NCHE	National Council for Higher Education

3. Recognition of prior learning and the social dimension of higher education

3.1. Linking RPL and the social dimension of higher education

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is primarily framed in the broader policy context of lifelong learning and – by association – with workforce development objectives of the Lisbon Strategy (Adelman, 2012). By validating non-formal and informal learning, the implementation of RPL will enable citizens to improve their position at work, in society, and on the labour market, to become more mobile and to access further learning opportunities throughout their lifetime (Lafont and Pariat, 2012). RPL thereby supports economic growth by creating a more competitive workforce and also enhances social cohesion since it contributes to improving citizens' employment and career prospects, from the most highly skilled to those with low levels of qualification (ibid.).

However, RPL is equally relevant to another policy priority in the field of higher education: addressing social inequalities in access to higher education and widening participation in higher education, particularly of under-represented groups. This policy priority is defined in the documents of the Bologna Process as the “social dimension” of higher education.

3.1.1. About the social dimension

The concept of the social dimension of higher education was first developed within the Bologna Process in the Prague Communiqué of 2001 and, broadly speaking, refers to the goal of removing social and economic inequalities in access to higher education in the European Area of Higher Education. The goal was most clearly defined in the London Communiqué of 2007:

“We share the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations. We reaffirm the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background. We therefore continue our efforts to provide adequate student services, create more flexible learning pathways into and within higher education, and to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity.”

(London Communiqué, 2007)

The “diversification” of the student body is a key aspect of the social dimension, which requires higher education institutions to attract new and “non-traditional” populations to participate in higher education (Smidt & Sursock, 2011). These groups can include the following:

- Persons from lower socioeconomic status
- Persons from rural areas
- Mature learners
- “Returners”(former drop-outs or professional up-skilling)
- Immigrants and ethnic minorities
- Learners with no formal qualifications
- Students with disabilities

(Based on: Smidt & Sursock, 2011; Santiago et al., 2008;)

As can be seen from some of the “non-traditional” groups identified above, addressing the social dimension of higher education in general (and widening participation of under-represented groups in particular), can in many cases be closely related to lifelong learning. The Leuven Communiqué of 2009 links these two aspects of the Bologna Process by arguing that they ensure the “maximisation” of available talent in Europe’s societies and to ensure social and economic development:

“In the decade up to 2020 European higher education has a vital contribution to make in realising a Europe of knowledge that is highly creative and innovative. Faced with the challenge of an ageing population Europe can only succeed in this endeavour if it maximises the talents and capacities of all its citizens and fully engages in lifelong learning as well as in widening participation in higher education.”

(Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, 2009)

As we will see below, RPL can play an important role in reaching both the goals of the social dimension of higher education and lifelong learning.

3.1.2. RPL, lifelong learning and the social dimension

Widening participation in higher education requires a comprehensive set of policy measures which can address the different obstacles faced by different under-represented groups (and/or other vulnerable groups) to access higher education. To provide some illustrative examples (based on Santiago et al., 2008; Bologna Process Working Group, 2007), measures can be taken to raise aspirations of high-school pupils to enter higher education, to provide learning support to pupils who do not perform well academically, to ensure inclusive admissions policies of higher education institutions, to provide flexible learning opportunities and study programmes and to provide financial support to students.

There are four main groups of “non-traditional” students that are of particular importance when addressing in parallel the issues of the social dimension and lifelong learning, and for which RPL can provide a key tool to encourage their increased participation in higher education. The first group are mature learners, i.e. students who enrol in higher education later than the traditional enrolment age.⁵ The following groups are:

⁵ There is no internationally accepted definition of the term „mature students“. In some countries, the term can refer to students that enroll for the first time after the age of 21, in other cases after 25, or in some cases student who aged 30 or above (European Commission, 2011). In this document the term will refer to students who first enrol in higher education after the age of 21.

- Learners could not enrol in higher education, due to not having the necessary school-leaving qualifications.
- Learners who could not (or chose not to) enrol in higher education, despite having the formal qualifications to do so.
- “Second chance” students (former higher education drop-outs).

Of course, there is likely to be significant overlap between the group of “mature learners” and the three other groups listed: the latter groups are all likely to be mature students when enrolling in higher education. However, mature students are still relevant as a separate category, since they may also be students who have already completed a degree, but could still make use of RPL for acquiring credits based on their prior learning.

In addition to being important target groups from the perspective of ensuring lifelong learning opportunities, all four groups are important from the perspective of diversification of the student population, and from the perspective of addressing educational inequalities based on socioeconomic background. Namely, it is widely acknowledged that lower educational attainment and dropping out of higher education are phenomena that are more likely to occur among lower socioeconomic groups (see, for example, Santiago et al., 2008). Based on data from Croatia, the mature students who are enrolled also assess their socioeconomic status as being lower than average, and they have been shown to be more at risk of dropping out of higher education (Farnell et al., 2012). Ensuring wider access of these groups to higher education could therefore contribute to having a more diversified student body, with a higher proportion of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Based on this overview of the potential beneficiaries of RPL in the context of the social dimension of higher education, the next section will provide a more detailed overview of these target groups in Croatia, presenting data (where available) on the level of participation of these groups in higher education in and the current challenges faced in Croatia with regards to drop-out rates.

3.2. Croatia: under-represented groups and potential targets of RPL policy

3.2.1. Students of lower socioeconomic status

To understand the broader context of inequalities in access to higher education in Croatia, it is important to provide data on the level of representation of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in higher education, since this reflects on the overall inclusiveness of the system. The indicator of socioeconomic status⁶ is also closely related to each of the potential beneficiaries of RPL as mentioned in the last section.

According to data collected through the EUROSTUDENT survey in Croatia (Farnell et al., 2012), students whose fathers have completed tertiary education are greatly overrepresented in the student population in Croatia (35% compared to 16% in the corresponding population), while students whose fathers have completed a three-year secondary school education are greatly under-represented (18% compared to 48% in the general population), as are students whose fathers have completed primary school education or lower (6% compared to 21% in the general population). Additionally, if one looks at the highest level of education of parents (either father or mother), nearly half of Croatian students (45%) at least one parent has a higher education degree, while only 3% of students have at least one parent who has only completed primary school (Farnell et al., 2012).

Although such inequalities in access to higher education based on socioeconomic background exist in most countries (see: Santiago et al., 2008; Camilleri & Mühleck (eds), 2010), in European comparison the social inclusiveness of the Croatian higher education system is among the lowest in Europe. According to a comparison of EUROSTUDENT data for Croatia (Farnell et al., 2012) with the EUROSTUDENT data for all European countries (Orr et al., 2011), Croatia is among the countries

⁶ The assessment of socioeconomic status can be made based on analysis of an individual's or family's income, educational attainment and occupation. In the EUROSTUDENT survey report for Croatia (Farnell et al., 2012), the indicator of parental educational level was used as a proxy for students' socioeconomic status.

which display significant under-representation of students of parents with low levels of education and significant overrepresentation of students of parents with high levels of education. According to the scale and categorisation set by Orr et al. (ibid.), Croatia can be considered as having a “socially exclusive” higher education system.

3.2.2. Mature learners

The lack of provision of study opportunities for mature students was emphasised in an expert review of the tertiary education system in Croatia carried out by experts from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Duke et al., 2008). The review noted that:

“... there appears to be little or no consideration that lifelong learning might extend to degree studies for older people. Moreover, the system of access and funding favours school-leavers, and there does not appear to be specialist support to assist mature students to enter tertiary education.” (ibid., p. 47).

A first indicator of the proportion of mature students in a given higher education system is to analyse the proportion of students over a certain age. According to the internationally comparative EUROSTUDENT report (Orr et al. 2011), Croatia is the country with the least proportion of mature students enrolled in ISCED 5A study programmes (university studies) in Europe. In Croatia, only 9% of enrolled students are over 24 years of age, whereas Austria has 53% of such students, Denmark 52% and Finland 47% (ibid). Having said that, around 75% of all mature students are enrolled in professional studies in Croatia (ISCED 5B), not university studies. On average, between 13% and 22% of students enrolled in professional studies are over the age of 24 (depending on the professional higher education institution), whereas the proportion of mature students enrolled in university studies is between 2% and 6% for five out of seven public universities (Farnell et al., 2013). This suggests that vocationally-oriented programmes are more attractive to mature students and/or that institutions providing these programmes are more inclusive.

In addition to data on the overall age structure of the student population, data is also available on the enrolments trends of students by age (Farnell et al., 2013). In 2010, 20.6% of students enrolling in the first year of studies were over the age of 20, and 10.2% were over the age of 24. It should be noted, however, that these figures include students who were previously enrolled in another study programme, which means that the actual number of students enrolling for the first time is probably significantly lower. An estimate of that figure is provided by the national EUROSTUDENT report for Croatia (Farnell et al., 2012), according to which only 8.1% of students who enrolled in the first of studies (for the first time) were over 20 years of age.

So although the proportion of mature students is low overall, the above figures confirm that such students do have a genuine opportunity to access higher education. At the same time, there are indications that since the introduction of a nationally standardised school-leaving examination in 2010/2011 (the so-called State Graduation Exam, *Državna matura*), which became mandatory for access to higher education, the numbers of students over the age of 20 (re)enrolling in higher education dropped by around 10% (from 23% in 2006/2007 to 20.6% in from 2010/2011).

In addition to “structural” obstacles to higher education access for mature students, the results of the EUROSTUDENT survey in Croatia (Farnell et al., 2013), mature students appear to study in less favourable circumstances than most other students. Mature students assess their socioeconomic status as being slightly lower than other students, they have a less favourable assessment of the sufficiency of the funds at their disposal for covering their monthly costs and they assess the burden of their study workload (in relationship to the available time they have) to be significantly higher than students. These negative self-assessments are probably closely related to the fact that around 60% of mature students are in full-time employment during their studies, and that the same proportion are enrolled as part-time students, none of which have access to student financial support (either through grants or public subsidies). Overall, these study conditions may explain why, according to research

by Mihaljević Kosor (2010) at the University of Split, mature students have a higher risk of dropping-out during the first year of study.

3.2.3. Learners without entry qualifications

In order to understand the “traditional” and “non-traditional” access routes to higher education in Croatia, it is necessary to provide a brief introduction to the secondary school system and to the process of transition to higher education. The secondary school system in Croatia is divided into four-year, academically-oriented gymnasiums (*gimnazije*), and three-year or four-year vocational schools (*strukovne škole*). Only pupils of four-year schools who pass the State Graduation Exam (*Državna matura*) are automatically eligible to progress to higher education. The State Graduation Exam must be taken by all students of gymnasiums, and can be taken by students of four-year vocational schools who wish to enrol in higher education.

In Croatia, around 46% of secondary school pupils are enrolled in four-year vocational schools, 30% in gymnasiums, and 21.5% in three-year vocational schools (CBS, 2012). Effectively, this means that more than a fifth of all secondary school-leavers are denied the opportunity to enrol in higher education following the completion of their schooling. This does not mean that none of these pupils manage to enter higher education, however, the only way school-leavers from three-year vocational schools can enter higher education is by passing additional examinations, or by entering certain a small number of vocational study programmes that have an exception to the rule of enrolment based on the completion of the State Graduation Exam.

Almost all students in Croatia enrol in higher education through the “traditional” entry route, i.e. based on completion of four-year upper secondary schools. According to EUROSTUDENT survey data for Croatia (Farnell et al., 2012), 94% of enrolled students enrolled in their study programme based on qualifications from four-year upper-secondary schools. Regarding the rest of the student body who entered via

“non-traditional” routes, the findings of the EUROSTUDENT survey were the following:

- 3.5% entered either via 3-year secondary school (without passing an additional examinations)
- 1.3% entered either via 3-year secondary school (and passing an additional examination)
- 2.4% enrolled based on other secondary school qualifications, not acquired through four-year schools (most probably based on a completed adult education programme).

These data suggest that alternative entry routes exist, but are very rarely used in Croatia

Individuals who have completed three-year vocational secondary schools are therefore the group that could benefit most from the introduction of RPL at Croatian higher education institutions. The relevance of ensuring access to higher education and to lifelong learning for students from these schools is wide-ranging. On the one hand, the type of secondary school attended is closely related to socioeconomic status: students who attended gymnasiums are far more likely to be from higher socioeconomic backgrounds than students of vocational schools, and pupils of three-year vocational schools are likely to be from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds (Matković, 2009.a). Once they complete their secondary education, they are likely to high incidence of unemployment or unstable employment (although this outcome also similar among pupils who only complete four-year secondary schools without enrolling in higher education) (ibid.).

Another potential group to add to the category of learners without entry qualifications are those who have dropped out of school at the secondary level (or earlier).

However, survey data on the educational careers of youth in Croatia (UNDP Croatia n.d.), there is almost universal progression from primary to secondary school and a negligible proportion of drop-out from secondary school (around 2%).

3.2.4. Learners with entry qualifications who did not enrol after secondary school

According to a survey by UNDP Croatia (n.d.), 18% of school-leavers from gymnasiums did not enrol in higher education, whereas the figure is as high as 55% for four-year vocational school-leavers. As mentioned above, according to Matković (2009.a), school-leavers from four-year schools are vulnerable to unemployment and poorer quality employment than higher education graduates. There are little additional data available on these groups of school-leavers.

3.2.5. Drop-outs (“second chance” students)

Although no official data on drop-out rates is analysed or published in Croatia, estimates by Matković (2009.b) based on data of the Central Bureau of Statistics show that the completion rate in Croatia was 59% (i.e. a 41% drop-out rate) for the generation that graduated in 2007. These findings are corroborated by a survey by UNDP Croatia (n.d.), according to which the share of young people who enrolled in professional studies and successfully graduated was 52%, while the proportion of young people who complete university studies was higher at 62%. Comparing these estimates to data on completion rates in OECD countries for the year 2008 (OECD, 2010), Croatia has significantly higher drop-out rates than the average OECD or EU-19 countries (31% and 30% respectively), which places Croatia among the countries with the highest drop-out rates from higher education (above 40%).

Non-completion of higher education has a variety of causes, including weak prior academic preparation, poor career guidance, adverse financial circumstances of students, collusion of employment and study and lack of institutional support (Santiago et al., 2008). The aforementioned survey youth education and employment in Croatia (UNDP Croatia n.d.) has shown that the relative majority of students who have dropped out of higher education (around 50%) mention loss of motivation to study as one of the causes for dropping out, around 30% mention the desire or need for employment and over 15% mentioned academic difficulties. According to other research carried out in Croatia (Doolan, 2010; Matković et al 2010; and Mihaljević

Kosor, 2010), certain groups of students are more likely to drop-out of higher education than others, and these are students of lower socioeconomic status, mature students and students who have completed vocational secondary schools.

Ensuring that those who drop out of higher education find a way to re-enrol and successfully complete their studies is therefore a high priority for the ensuring social dimension of higher education.

In addition to considering the phenomenon of non-completion of studies, an interesting indicator is the phenomenon of “pausing of studies”, which refers to the temporary interruption of studies of a period of one year or more, after which the student re-enrols in the same (or a new) study programme. In this sense, pausing of studies is a much better educational outcome than non-completion, but it does also point to difficulties that certain groups of students encounter, and which result in them temporarily dropping out of their studies. EUROSTUDENT survey data for Croatia provides data on this phenomenon, according to which between 6% and 15% of students enrolled in university studies paused their studies for more than one year, whereas this was the case for as many as 27% to 32% of students enrolled in professional studies (Farnell et al., 2013).

Finally, in addition to the previous indicator of “pausing of studies”, it is possible to estimate the proportion of students who re-enrolled in a *new* study programme after dropping out of a previous programme (as opposed to resuming the previously enrolled programme). Since, according to data of the Central Bureau of Statistics, a total of 20.6% of students in 2010/2011 enrolled in their studies over the age of 21, and that according to EUROSTUDENT data 8.1 % of students of the age of 21 enrolled in their study programme for the first time, it is possible to roughly estimate that 12% of students over the age of 21 changed their study programme and re-enrolled after initially dropping out (Farnell et al., 2013).

3.3. Challenges and opportunities and for advancing the social dimension through RPL

3.3.1. Targeted policy measures for improving access of the analysed groups

Based on a review of international research on equity in higher education by Santiago et al (2008), the two main policy measures that are necessary to ensure the wider inclusion of the aforementioned groups in higher education are the following:

- **Diversifying the supply of higher education to accommodate a more diverse set of learners:** The inclusion of non-traditional learners (who have a wide diversity of backgrounds, experiences, aptitudes and aspirations) in higher education requires the diversification of the supply of study programmes. This could include an increased focus on vocationally-oriented programmes, the provision short-cycle certificate and diploma programmes, the provision of part-time study and evening courses, as well as the provision of distance learning options.
- **Ensuring alternative pathways into higher education:** Completing upper secondary school should not be the sole means to become eligible for tertiary education. This means creating more diverse pathways into higher education, recognition of prior learning (formal, informal and non-formal learning) as valid criteria for entry for individuals who do not possess a school-leaving certificate. Additionally, bridging programmes can be developed jointly with adult learning institutions.

However, in addition to these main measures, the following interventions should also be considered in parallel, in order to ensure the effectiveness and genuine impact of the aforementioned policies:

- **Ensuring and encouraging inclusive admissions policies:** Closely linked to the previous point, establishing a formal structure for recognizing prior

learning is a necessary, but not sufficient, mechanism for encouraging broader access to higher education. Many admissions systems perpetuate socioeconomic exclusion patterns by focusing on either secondary school performance or performance in admission tests (Astin and Oseguera, 2004, in: EACEA/Eurydice 2011). Alternative approaches include targeted recruiting of non-traditional groups of students, prioritising such groups in admissions procedures (so-called affirmative action) and providing financial incentives to higher education institutions to enrol students from under-represented groups (EACEA/Eurydice 2011).

- **Providing academic, psychological and financial support to ensure retention and completion:** The entry of under-represented groups into higher education is only the first step, which must be followed by ensuring retention and successful completion. In order to achieve this, adequate support should be provided to non-traditional students so they can overcome potential academic, financial and other difficulties that they may face during their studies.

3.3.2. Policy priorities in the Croatian context

In light of the approaches to widening participation and diversifying the student population proposed above, priorities in the specific Croatian context could be the following:

- **RPL at higher education institutions:** introducing RPL in Croatia will provide an genuine alternative pathway into higher education for non-traditional students for all the groups identified above, either by providing them with the necessary qualifications to enrol in a study programme, and/or as an incentive to do so due to the possibility of obtaining credits for certain courses and possibly even entire degree programmes.
- **Introducing genuine part-time study programmes:** current part-time study programmes in Croatia are predominantly study programmes that are *de facto* full-time programmes which are all fee-paying and which differ to standard

programmes only due to the lack of obligation to attend classes. Genuine part-time study programmes with flexible timetables could allow much wider participation in higher education for mature learners, learners who are employed full-time, and learners with children. When planning the introduction of such programmes, one of the factors to take into account is that non-traditional students are more likely to come from vocational education backgrounds and that mature students are currently predominantly enrolled in professional studies.

- **Developing an institutional quality culture which promotes inclusion and diversity:** Making higher education more inclusive and diverse cannot happen without incentives to adopt such values. Incentives could include validating such values within institutional and national quality assurance procedures, and by providing performance-based funding to institutions to promote activities in that area. A positive step in this direction was taken by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports in 2012/2013 by including the priorities of widening participation of lower socioeconomic groups and mature students in the first funding agreements signed with higher education institutions which included performance-based funding.
- **Raising awareness of, and recruiting, non-traditional students:** once the preconditions are in place for providing adequate study programmes that can meet the needs, interests and time constraints of non-traditional students, it is equally important to effectively inform non-traditional students of the study opportunities that exist, of the benefits of enrolling into higher education and of the alternative entry paths into higher education, including RPL.
- **Financial support for students:** Widening participation requires a careful assessment of the costs of higher education and of the ability of different groups to be able to meet these costs. If there are financial obstacles, these should be able to be surmounted through targeted and needs-based student financial support policies. Such targeted support would represent both a precondition for some individuals to enrol, and an incentive to enrol and complete their studies (for example, through providing a special grant for

completion studies). Since the procedure of RPL may result in substantial costs for the candidates, the question is who will pay for these costs in cases when applicants are from disadvantaged backgrounds is crucial, and requires an equitable approach.

In conclusion, RPL is a highly relevant tool that not only promotes lifelong learning, but also opens an alternative pathway into higher education for non-traditional students and thereby contributes to widening participation in higher education. At the same time, however, it is a tool that must be introduced in conjunction with a broad range of other measures in order to ensure both a short-term and long-term impact on the social dimension of higher education.

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