

Keynote Address

Inclusion and Social Dimension of Higher Education

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Equal access to education is crucial not only for realising human rights but also for fostering individual and societal development. Although we primarily emphasise the educational dimension, the social dimension of higher education holds equal significance. Education equality is an integral component of social equity, ensuring that everyone can access and develop knowledge and skills without facing discrimination (Sočo & Zrnić, 2021).

Discrimination puts individuals or groups at a disadvantage compared to others based on certain characteristics, such as disability. Disability has the potential to expose a person to discrimination, as the term is used to describe people based on certain characteristics or the lack of abilities. This can lead to stigmatisation in various aspects of social life (Mattila & Papageorgiou, 2017), representing direct discrimination. Indirect discrimination occurs when seemingly neutral provisions or rules create disadvantages for specific individuals or groups. For instance, prohibiting pets on public transportation may discriminate against blind people who rely on guide dogs for mobility. Discrimination can also take multiple forms, combining various grounds such as gender, age, and disability at the same time. Moreover, individuals related to people with disabilities, including parents, relatives, peers, and teachers, might also experience discrimination. This form of discrimination, referred to as "transferred or associative discrimination" or "courtesy stigma" (Goffman,

1963), can lead to the exclusion of people with disabilities from the social community and, consequently, from the (higher) educational system.

Higher education plays a crucial role in developing the skills, competencies, and knowledge essential for thriving in our society. However, certain educational structures and policies inadvertently contribute to the exclusion of socially disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, resulting in low participation rates in higher education (European Commission, European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2022).

The underrepresentation of specific social groups, even if unintentional, poses challenges at both individual and collective levels. For example, young people from immigrant backgrounds, experiencing limited opportunities to access and complete higher education, are more susceptible to unemployment or being confined to low-skilled and low-paid jobs. Consequently, this not only results in economic precarity but also fosters social marginalisation and alienation (European Commission, European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2022).

Exclusion from higher education has far-reaching consequences, impacting not only personal development and career prospects but also economic productivity and growth. Therefore, increasing the participation of vulnerable, disadvantaged, and underrepresented groups in higher education yields broader benefits, such as reduced welfare provision, improved health outcomes, and increased community involvement. These combined advantages foster the cohesion of a democratic society, emphasising recognised values such as social justice, the public good, public responsibility, and social mobility (European Commission, European Education and Culture

Executive Agency, 2022). It is all these factors mentioned above that constitute the social dimension of higher education.

The social dimension of higher education can be achieved by recognising higher education as a public good that should be accessible to everyone, irrespective of their social and economic status. This inclusivity extends to underrepresented and vulnerable student groups.

Recruiting students from traditionally underrepresented groups in higher education should be a primary objective. This entails adopting innovative approaches to connect with these students and offer them support through flexible access and study pathways, making higher education feasible for them. Embracing true inclusivity and equity does not compromise on quality. Inclusion and excellence are not conflicting values or principles. A more inclusive academic system and community thrive on a diverse array of strengths and talents, fostering a fertile environment for knowledge creation and innovation both academically and socially (Bush & Trani, 2021).

In today's world, universities must exhibit and advocate for leadership that propels higher education institutions forward, embraces social and moral responsibility, and contributes to a more united and inclusive society. They can achieve this by fostering intercultural understanding, encouraging civic engagement, promoting ethical awareness, and ensuring equitable access to higher education (Gregersen-Hermans et al., 2021).

Thus, higher education is recognised as a fundamental catalyst for empowering individuals and societies. Its social dimension, integral to the entire process, holds the capacity to foster equality, fairness, and inclusion

within higher education. This emphasis on equity and well-being aligns with the mission of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA, n.d.).

Enhancing the social dimension of higher education has been a core foundation of the Bologna Process from its outset (Van Hees, 2022). References to the social dimension of higher education have been present in ministerial statements within the Bologna process since 2001. In 2007, during the London Communique, a comprehensive definition was agreed upon, stating: "The student population that enrolls, attends, and completes higher education at all levels reflects the diversity of our society."

Social inclusion is closely tied to the level of education attained, making the eradication of social inequalities in higher education crucial in fostering a society with equal opportunities. Achieving a fair and socially inclusive higher education requires implementing diverse measures to ensure that admission, successful academic performance, and degree attainment primarily depend on student competencies rather than personal characteristics and living circumstances beyond their control (Institute for Development of Education, n.d.).

The social dimension of higher education inherently embodies inclusivity, thereby enhancing the diversity of the student community. Addressing the challenges of inclusion is imperative, as everyone possesses an unequivocal and equal right to education—this right belongs to you, me, and every individual.

According to the Croatian Language Portal (2023), inclusion refers to a state of being encompassed and included. It signifies not only an attitude and tendency but also a policy that includes EVERYONE, not just the best but all

individuals. Consequently, "inclusive" implies involving, encompassing, and being an integral part of something. Inclusion emphasises respect for diversity rather than striving for equalisation. The focus lies in recognising the potential of each individual and providing the necessary support.

According to UNESCO (2017), (educational) inclusion represents a process aimed at overcoming barriers that hinder learners' attendance, participation, and achievements. Inclusion is considered a fundamental goal of contemporary education (Romstein & Sekulić-Majurec, 2015). Equity, on the other hand, denotes an attitude where the education of all learners is regarded as equally important.

The goal of inclusion is to secure equal opportunity, granting everyone equal access to goods, services, resources, and full participation in society, including education. This goal can be realised when EVERYONE actively engages, contributes, and enjoys the benefits. In the context of higher education, this means enabling students to pursue their professional interests and acquire the learning outcomes of their chosen study programme in line with their abilities.

Equal opportunities imply achieving a state of equality, embracing the same value system, attaining equivalent outcomes, and being treated the same (Croatian Language Portal, 2023). The realisation of equal opportunities involves selecting methods that best suit each individual, considering their unique abilities and needs. Equality of opportunity is not synonymous with uniform conditions; rather, it necessitates adapting and adjusting the environment, requirements, forms of communication, teaching techniques, methods, and more, to cater to everyone through an individualised approach.

There is a distinction between integration and inclusion. Integration (Croatian Language Portal, 2023) involves unification, fusion, connection, and adaptation to a new environment. It includes assimilation, where individuals fit into the existing environment, and adaptation, where behaviour is reshaped and changed. Integration typically involves a one-way change for individuals or groups. Therefore, social integration merely encompasses the physical presence of different people in society, with expectations for them to adapt and become as similar as possible to the average, ordinary, or "normal."

On the other hand, inclusion involves the integration of people with fewer opportunities (underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable groups) to ensure they receive equal rights and opportunities in life. This encompasses improving conditions and implementing measures of positive discrimination, which means compensating for their less favourable position (e.g., using various aids, assistive technology, subsidies). It also entails placing them in a better position than others (e.g., quotas, the right to direct access to faculty, secured parking spaces) and providing support, empowerment, and adapted education for their development.

People with fewer opportunities (underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable groups) exhibit diversity and uniqueness, which is inherently valuable as it fosters a wide range of views, perspectives, and discourse, leading to innovative and creative solutions. Emphasising the ethical advantages of encountering diversity, it raises awareness, reduces prejudice, and cultivates more realistic attitudes within a genuine and expanded social environment. Encouraging active social action and embracing diversity in its broadest sense are integral parts of this process (Kiš-Glavaš, 2023).

To ensure effective inclusive action and policies for all three groups of students with fewer opportunities, it is essential to have a comprehensive understanding of who these groups include, what belonging to one of these groups entails, how they can overlap and to what extent. Authors Panchenko et al. (2022) reference the Rome Ministerial Communiqué (2020) when differentiating vulnerable, disadvantaged, and underrepresented groups of students.

According to the Communiqué (2020), underrepresented students are those whose representation is lower than a comparable group's share in the total population, considering specific characteristics such as gender, age, nationality, geographic origin, socioeconomic background, and ethnic minorities. This underrepresentation can be observed at the time of admission, during studies, or at graduation. Individuals often exhibit multiple underrepresented characteristics, emphasising the importance of considering combinations of underrepresented characteristics, referred to as "intersectionality."

Furthermore, underrepresentation can manifest at various levels of higher education, including study programmes, faculties or departments, and higher education institutions and systems. This definition complements the previously mentioned London Communiqué (2020), which emphasises that the student body in higher education should reflect the diversity of populations but does not fully encompass the concept of underrepresentation.

Disadvantaged students are characterised as students who often encounter specific challenges in higher education, setting them apart from their peers. These challenges can take various forms, including disabilities, low family income, little or no family support, being an orphan, experiencing frequent

school moves, mental health issues, pregnancy, or having limited time to study due to the need to work or fulfill caregiving duties. The extent of disadvantage may vary, with some experiencing it permanently, intermittently, or only for a limited period. It is crucial to note that disadvantaged students may or may not belong to an underrepresented group, making "disadvantaged" and "underrepresented" distinct terms and not synonymous.

Vulnerable students are individuals who face the risk of disadvantage and, in addition, have specific (protection) needs. This vulnerability may arise due to various factors, such as suffering from an illness (including mental health conditions) or having a disability. Other vulnerabilities include being minors, having their residence permit dependent on academic performance (and therefore subject to individual teachers' decisions), or being at risk of discrimination. These students are vulnerable because they might encounter challenges in ensuring their personal well-being or safeguarding themselves from harm or exploitation. As a result, they require additional support and attention to help them navigate their educational journey effectively.

Inclusivity brings benefits to everyone involved. Author Gozik (2021) introduces the concept of "inclusive excellence," which stems from a strengths-based perspective, emphasising that all students gain more from being in an inclusive environment.

Diversity is fostered, valued, and embraced through universal design. Universal design refers to the creation of objects, goods, and services that can be utilised by individuals with various abilities without the need for modification, to the greatest extent possible. In its widest scope, it caters to all

individuals, from infants to the elderly, irrespective of their abilities (Kiš-Glavaš, 2023).

Currently, universal design for learning is gaining greater prominence as an approach to teaching and learning, seeking to offer all students an equitable opportunity for success. It entails employing diverse methods to motivate students, utilising various teaching materials and techniques, and allowing for diverse ways of demonstrating knowledge. However, in specific instances, especially when working with people with disabilities, this approach does not preclude the need for additional accommodation (reasonable accommodation).

Reasonable accommodation is a personalised measure adapted to the specific needs of an individual person (Ombudswoman for Persons with Disabilities, n.d.). It comprises necessary and reasonable adjustments and accommodations that do not impose a disproportionate or undue burden, facilitating children with developmental disabilities, i.e., persons with disabilities, to enjoy or benefit from all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with others in individual cases where deemed necessary (UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006). So, it could be derived that universal design is proactive and reasonable accommodation is reactive.

According to the Salto-Youth Inclusion Resource Centre (2009) booklet, inclusion in practice is an ongoing participatory process. It recognises that young people are the experts on their own lives, empowering them to control the process and set the agenda based on their current circumstances. Inclusion entails involving young individuals regardless of age, sex, gender, sexual preference, ethnicity, belief, socioeconomic status, or ability. It provides them with the skills, knowledge, and opportunities necessary to actively participate

as equal citizens at all levels of society, granting them the power and opportunity to contribute, with their contributions recognised and respected. Inclusive practices extend beyond the obvious and conventional aspects, incorporating activities such as meeting with friends, going to the movies, bars, and clubs, as these experiences and opportunities often add quality to our lives.

Authors Gregersen-Hermans et al. (2021) elucidate that belongingness serves as a metric of inclusivity. They emphasise that belongingness and inclusivity can be viewed as two sides of the same coin. In the higher education context, inclusivity pertains to the intentional consideration and equal relevance of the diverse range of student voices, perspectives, and experiences in institutional decision-making, focusing on the institution itself.

On the other hand, belonging refers to the emotional attachment of students to their university, fostered by factors such as a robust social support network and an appropriate balance between academic challenge and support. It centers on student-university relationships, and a positive sense of belonging is correlated with improved academic performance (Gregersen-Hermans et al., 2021).

A university ethos that prioritises students' sense of belonging is based on respect, integrity, and equity, acknowledging the inherent value and contribution of each student. This ethos allows every individual to find a sense of home at their institution (Gregersen-Hermans et al., 2021). But how to promote equality, fairness, and inclusion in higher education?

According to UNESCO (2017), fostering inclusive and equitable education necessitates acknowledging that students' challenges stem from various

aspects of the education system itself. These aspects include the current organisation of education systems, the types of instruction provided, the learning environment, and the approach to supporting and assessing student progress. Transforming this understanding into tangible reforms is crucial, with the perspective that individual differences should not be viewed as problems requiring fixing but rather as opportunities to democratise and enrich learning. Embracing differences can act as a catalyst for innovations that benefit all learners, irrespective of their personal characteristics and circumstances (UNESCO, 2017).

The Academic Cooperation Association (ACA, 2023) is an organisation dedicated to promoting and funding the internationalisation of higher education. In early 2021, ACA placed significant emphasis on understanding and supporting inclusion in international higher education, particularly within the context of Europe. To accomplish this goal, they decided to share insights along the way with the help of experts in the field of inclusion through an ACA Think Piece series titled "Inclusion in International Higher Education: European Perspectives & Insights."

While this series of professional papers specifically addresses inclusion in higher education in the context of international cooperation, the reflections from the experts have broader applicability. Many of the insights gleaned from this series can be relevant and applicable to the context of any higher education institution or procedure. Consequently, the reflections provided by the experts in this series serve as valuable guidelines for advancing inclusivity in higher education overall.

Janebova et al. (2021) emphasise that inclusive education goes beyond mere box-ticking on an organisational "to-do" checklist. It requires a commitment to challenging the underlying assumptions and culturally ingrained biases within organisations and taking tangible steps to effect change. For instance, Kiš-Glavaš's (2014) study reveals that students with disabilities who use wheelchairs and blind students express the highest satisfaction with the support system in higher education in Croatia. This positive outcome is likely a result of agreements between public universities, university colleges of applied sciences, community colleges, and the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education, which fund the implementation of strategic goals encompassing the social dimension of higher education.¹

However, most higher education institutions have predominantly utilised the funds to enhance the environmental accessibility of buildings and entrances, such as constructing elevators, ramps, and tactile guidance systems for the blind. Conversely, they have made considerably fewer efforts or none at all to adapt the teaching process and train university teachers to work effectively with students with disabilities. Therefore, students with so-called invisible impairments, those who require support from teachers in the classroom, such as students with specific learning difficulties like dyslexia, Asperger's syndrome², ADHD, various chronic diseases, and especially students with

¹ According to the decision of the Croatian Government on the conditions, criteria, and manner of subsidising participation fees of studies of full-time students, and co-financing of material costs for public higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia in the academic years 2015/2016, 2016/2017, and 2017/2018, <https://vlada.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/Sjednice/2015/238%20sjednica%20Vlade/238%20-%204.pdf>

² Although the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) no longer recognises "Asperger's Syndrome" as a separate diagnosis and has included it under a unified diagnosis

psychological disabilities, express dissatisfaction with the support system in higher education in the Republic of Croatia (Kiš-Glavaš, 2014).

Although higher education institutions have implemented the most expensive adjustments to support a specific group of students, it appears that they have merely fulfilled the minimum requirements to check off the lists. While they may claim in their reports that they are striving to improve the social dimension of higher education, the overall impact on all students with disabilities has been limited.

Of course, specific accommodations will always be necessary for certain individuals and groups. However, it is also essential to reform our institutional systems to enhance their responsiveness and accessibility to diverse and varied populations (Johnstone & Edwards, 2019). So, who are these populations? Who are the potential participants in higher education who have historically been excluded?

Ten or more years ago, the individuals who were often excluded participants in higher education included those with disabilities and individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, which sometimes encompassed students with children. Bohle (2021) further highlighted participants with physical, mental, and health-related conditions, students who had parental responsibilities, students who were employed, professional athletes, and students from study fields that were underrepresented in mobility programmes. These students were typically referred to as "disadvantaged students," a term that could be stigmatising for them (Guedens, 2021).

of Autism Spectrum Disorder, the term "Asperger's Syndrome" is used here as it was the term used in the original research.

In the past, we used to identify target groups, but today, our focus has shifted towards recognising and listing the multiple barriers that hinder equal participation in higher education. A barrier is anything that obstructs the achievement of a goal. Increasing motivation can help overcome barriers, but when the barriers are too significant, motivation tends to decrease. For instance, when discussing people with disabilities, we often refer to their special or specific needs. However, the reality is that the key issue lies in the barriers they encounter daily, such as environmental obstacles, prejudices, negative attitudes, and discrimination.

Additionally, proximity to the goal is crucial in this context. The closer a person is to their goal, the higher their motivation tends to be. Conversely, if the desired goal seems too distant, the investment to achieve it diminishes. Therefore, it is essential to provide or bring opportunities closer for people with disabilities, allowing them to get nearer to their goals.

Furthermore, the level of expectations also plays a vital role. It refers to what an individual expects of themselves when they undertake a task and is influenced by the expectations of significant others such as parents and teachers. Low expectations for someone can result in a reduced level of commitment, while higher expectations can lead to greater dedication. Unfortunately, people with disabilities are frequently subjected to overprotection and evaluation below their actual potential. The expectations of their social environment regarding their performance tend to be very low, which can negatively impact their own aspirations and may even result in learned helplessness. Hence, it is of utmost importance to create opportunities for them and to instill belief in their abilities.

Today, we refer to students who are categorised as students with fewer opportunities (and the term "students facing barriers" is preferred) or those whose personal, psychological, physical, mental, or health conditions are such that their participation in higher education would not be feasible without additional financial or other support. It is essential to use inclusive language, acknowledging and systematically listing both genders to ensure representation and fairness.

After listing exclusion factors, an ellipsis is always added to the end of each list to ensure that this definition of who we want to include never excludes young people who could genuinely benefit from our inclusion support. Additionally, new exclusionary factors might emerge over time, such as mental health challenges (as observed during the COVID-19 pandemic), digital addiction, and others. It is essential to remain flexible in our approach to inclusion and adapt as circumstances evolve.

Moreover, the relevance of exclusion factors may vary in different countries. In some countries, inclusion efforts may encompass members with migrant backgrounds, individuals with diverse skin colours, religions, or nationalities, HIV-positive students, and others. On the other hand, in countries with stringent accessibility policies, students with disabilities might have relatively independent access to higher education. Similarly, if there are generous national scholarships available, there may be less need to consider economic disadvantage as a significant exclusion factor. However, in countries where certain minorities or categories are underrepresented or face discrimination, there is a compelling need for additional support and efforts to ensure their participation (Guedens, 2021).

Therefore, individuals with fewer opportunities encounter one or more barriers that put them at a disadvantage compared to their peers. As previously mentioned, this unfavourable living environment often hinders their access to employment, participation in formal and informal education, transnational mobility, engagement in democratic processes, and full participation in society. They often face limited access to essential resources, such as adequate housing, employment opportunities, healthcare, cultural activities, and education (Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes – AMEUP, n.d.).

To promote the social dimension in higher education, Erasmus+, the EU mobility programme in the field of education, training, youth, and sport for the period 2021-2027, has a primary objective of fostering equal opportunities, accessibility, inclusion, diversity, and fairness in all its actions. As a part of this commitment, "Inclusion and Diversity" has been identified as one of the top priorities of the Erasmus+ programme (European Commission, 2023). The Erasmus+ Programme Guide outlines potential barriers that may impede students' participation, both as a single factor and in combination with other factors:

- Disabilities: This encompasses physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that, when combined with various barriers, may hinder an individual's full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.
- Health problems: Barriers may arise due to health problems, including severe illnesses, chronic diseases, or other physical or mental health conditions that prevent individuals from participating in the programme (education).

- Barriers related to education and training systems: This includes individuals who encounter difficulties within education and training systems for various reasons, such as school dropouts, NEETs (individuals not in education, employment, or training), and low-skilled adults. While other factors may also contribute, these educational challenges are often linked to personal circumstances and are typically a result of an education system that imposes structural limitations and/or fails to fully address the specific needs of individuals.
- Cultural differences: While cultural differences can be perceived as barriers by people from all backgrounds, they can have a particularly significant impact on individuals with fewer opportunities. Such differences may act as a notable hindrance to learning in general, especially for those from immigrant or refugee backgrounds - particularly newly arrived immigrants, individuals belonging to national or ethnic minorities, sign language users, etc.
- Social barriers: Social adjustment difficulties, such as limited social skills, antisocial or high-risk behaviour, (ex) offenders, (ex) drug or alcohol addicts, or social marginalisation, may present barriers. Other social barriers may arise from family circumstances, such as being the first in the family to pursue higher education or being a parent (especially a single parent), caregiver, breadwinner, or orphan, or having lived or currently living in institutional care.
- Economic barriers: Economic disadvantages, such as a low standard of living, low income, learners having to work to support themselves, dependence on the social welfare system, long-term unemployment, precarious situations, poverty, homelessness, debt, or financial problems,

etc., can be significant barriers. Additionally, difficulties may arise from the limited portability of services (especially support for people with fewer opportunities), which must be "mobile" along with participants when they relocate to distant locations or even abroad.

- Discrimination based on gender, age, ethnicity, religion, belief, sexual orientation, disability, or intersectional factors (a combination of two or more of the aforementioned grounds of discrimination) can act as significant barriers to access and participation.
- Geographical barriers: Individuals living in remote or rural areas, small islands, peripheral/outmost regions, urban suburbs, less developed areas (limited public transport, poor facilities), or less developed areas in third-world countries, etc., may face challenges in accessing higher education.

Another important concept to consider when discussing the creation of a more inclusive social dimension of higher education is intersectionality. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the term intersectionality refers to "the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect, especially in the experiences of marginalised individuals or groups" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.). In other words, intersectionality acknowledges the interconnectedness and interplay of various aspects of one's identity, resulting in a unique and complex experience that goes beyond simply combining multiple forms of discrimination. It recognises that experiencing discrimination on multiple bases creates specific challenges that are distinct from those arising from individual forms of discrimination.

For example, a person with disabilities who belongs to the majority ethnic/racial group might feel comfortable seeking support to overcome

barriers related to their disability. However, a person with disabilities from a minority ethnic/racial group might hesitate to seek support for their disability-related challenges due to the fear of facing discrimination based on their ethnicity/race.³

In 2014, the Croatian Parliament adopted the Strategy of Education, Science and Technology, which emphasises that "the inclusion of underrepresented persons in the system of higher education is one of the priorities for the development of the Croatian education system" (Objective no. 6.). The strategy outlines various tasks in the higher education section that aim to enhance the social dimension of higher education in Croatia. One of these tasks involves identifying underrepresented and vulnerable groups in higher education, as well as examining the factors that contribute to lower enrollment rates of students from these groups in higher education.

This task was entrusted to the cross-sectoral National Group for the Improvement of the Social Dimension of Higher Education. The group acts as an advisory body to the Government of the Republic of Croatia, the Ministry of Science and Education, the Rectors' Conference, and the Council of Universities and University Colleges of Applied Sciences. Its establishment was supported by one of the measures of the National Strategy.

Since its establishment in late 2015, the National Group has identified underrepresented groups of students in higher education (students whose share of higher education is lower compared to population data or compared to their share in other countries of the European Union) and vulnerable groups of

³ This is a simplified example of intersectionality, which is a complex concept and cannot be adequately described in a few paragraphs.

students (students who have fewer opportunities in higher education compared to other students, for example, in international mobility). The group has also identified some of the factors that put these students at risk:

Students whose parents have a lower level of education:

In the EUROSTUDENT sample (Šćukanec et al., 2016), 5.1 % of students have fathers with the lowest level of education, whereas in the population of men aged 40-60, 18.5 % have only primary education. Conversely, 34 % of fathers in the sample have secondary or higher education, while their share in the total population is 17 %. Typically, children of parents with a high level of education are more likely to enroll in universities and plan to study abroad (Šćukanec et al., 2016).

Students whose parents have primary and secondary education are significantly more likely to rate their financial difficulties as very serious or more serious than students whose parents have higher education (Šćukanec et al., 2016).

Students from families with a lower socioeconomic status:

Košutić et al. (2015) discovered that one-third of students cited a lack of financial resources as a reason for not continuing their education.

Students from families with a lower socioeconomic status often have full-time jobs, and those with full-time jobs perceive their study obligations' intensity to be lower compared to students who do not work (Šćukanec et al., 2016).

Students who work during their studies:

Students who work full-time have less time for study commitments than students who do not work (Šćukanec et al., 2016).

Female students in technical fields; male students in humanistic fields:

According to Jugović (2015), gender stereotypes about professions and fields of study are an important factor in choosing a field of study: the belief that one's gender indicates a lower level of talent for a particular profession or field of study is associated with a lower likelihood of choosing that field of study. Therefore, male students are the clear majority in technical sciences (70 %), while female students are the clear majority in humanities and social sciences (74 %) and medicine and healthcare (71 %) (Šćukanec et al., 2016). This, consequently, contributes to future socioeconomic inequality, as the typically male-dominated fields and professions are, on average, the ones with higher wages compared to the typically female-dominated fields.

Older students:

Only 8 % of students in Croatia enroll in higher education for the first time after the age of 21 (Šćukanec et al., 2016). Evidence suggests that older students are more likely to not complete their first year of study (Mihaljević Kosor, 2010), and that social integration into higher education is more difficult for them (Doolan et al., 2014).

Students with children:

Students who are parents indicate that studying is more difficult for them than for students who do not have children. They negatively assess the time available to them (Doolan et al., 2014).

Students with disabilities:

Students with disabilities represent a highly diverse group, leading to varied and individualised needs within the higher education system. Their challenges and requirements can be broadly categorised based on the nature of their disability. These may encompass the need for environmental accessibility, meaning having access to all areas for students with motor impairments; the need for adapted access to literature for students with visual impairments; the need to provide a communication facilitator for students with hearing impairments; the need for flexibility in the set deadlines for fulfilling student obligations, and sometimes the daily rhythm of activities for students with chronic diseases and mental disorders; and adapted teaching materials and assessment methods for students with specific learning difficulties and sometimes for those with motor and sensory impairments.

In addition to these adaptations, which are primarily the responsibility of higher education institutions, the inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education relies on various factors. These include the willingness of secondary education students with disabilities to pursue further education, access to adapted transportation and accommodation, support in dormitories and canteens, and the availability of assistive devices (Kiš-Glavaš, 2012).

Students who have completed vocational education:

According to Baranović (2015), a significant majority of high school students (98.5 %) and four-year vocational school students (75 %) aspire to attend university. However, the percentage decreases significantly for three-year vocational school students, with only 16.5 % planning to pursue higher education at a university. Similarly, there is evidence that it is more difficult for students who have completed vocational schools to pass first-year university exams (Mihaljević Kosor, 2010).

Students traveling to study:

According to Doolan et al. (2014), students who travel from another country cannot be present at all classes due to travel costs, as well as irregular public transportation. Because of the time required for travel, these students have less time to study.

Student-children of Croatian war veterans who died in the war:

The loss of a parent has a long-term negative impact on academic achievements; the negative impact is greater, the longer a child has grown up without the parent(s), and the psychological consequences of early parental loss are more pronounced, the older the child becomes (Kovač, 2015).

Students belonging to the Roma minority:

Members of the Roma minority are less likely to attend secondary schools, which is an obstacle to continuing their education at a higher level (Baranović, 2009).

LGBT+ students:

The results of a study conducted on a sample of high school students in Croatia (Jugović & Bezinović, 2015) show that LGBT+ students are more likely than heterosexual students to be exposed to relational violence and physical violence in school and are a potentially vulnerable group of students in higher education in Croatia. Furthermore, LGBT+ students face ignorance and prejudice that can, according to the UN Office of the Human Rights High Commissioner (UN OHCHR, 2019), take the form of discriminatory education policies, regulations, curricula, and teaching materials and practices. They are also exposed to homophobic/transphobic comments by both their peers and, although more rarely, staff (Štambuk et al., 2022), and the lack of LGBT-friendly and/or specialised support services.

Students coming from alternative care:

Young people from alternative care settings often participate in vocational education programmes, after which it is more difficult to continue their education at a higher level. In addition, financial difficulties make it more difficult for this group of young people to continue their education at higher levels (Šimić et al., 2011).

Students from rural areas, small towns, and islands:

Reasons for the underrepresentation of students from rural areas include financial difficulties because higher education institutions are located in urban areas. Schools in rural areas often do not have the same resources as schools in urban areas. Additionally, family and community support for study is often

lower in rural areas, and there is also a digital divide issue compared to students from urban areas (Kiš-Glavaš, 2019).

Refugees and asylum seekers:

Refugees and asylum seekers are considered, in the European and Croatian space, as a group in need of special protection, whose integration must be systematically supported by the national state. Lack of knowledge of the Croatian language, lower socioeconomic status, lack of integration into society, the education system, and the labour market, as well as problems with housing, are just some of the problems that these potential students face on a daily basis (Kiš-Glavaš, 2019).

This definition of vulnerability is consistent with the assumption that students from vulnerable and underrepresented groups encounter specific barriers related to their social position and identity during their studies. Recognition of the aforementioned barriers is a prerequisite for strengthening the social dimension of higher education, i.e., for expanding the "real options" for successful study and graduation (Puzić et al., 2020).

Well, how can we support them? What should we do?

Today, higher education institutions can no longer be just providers of courses, but should instead serve as facilitators of a functional link between students and graduates, their careers, education, and the business world. A student-oriented approach, which involves taking care of them from enrolment to graduation and preparing them for integration into society and the labour market, is a crucial factor for improving the quality of studies. This approach

should ultimately ensure an effective transition from education to the labour market and foster the professional and social development of graduates.

It is crucial to prioritise and demonstrate transparency while showing a willingness to be more inclusive. This approach will also encourage individuals from targeted groups to apply, even if they might have previously believed the opportunity was not meant for them. While it is acceptable to focus on certain student profiles, if students from other target groups express interest in participating in higher education, priorities should not serve as a reason to discourage them from applying or to reject their application (Guedens, 2021).

It is essential not to confuse equality and equity. Merely offering nominal or formal fairness, which implies equal rights and responsibilities for all, does not always guarantee real equality or equity in practice to promote inclusion and diversity in higher education. For instance, data shows (European Commission, European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2022) that children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds face relatively greater difficulties in school, resulting in them having different prospects for accessing higher education compared to students from more privileged backgrounds. Additionally, relatively more public money has been invested in young people of better socioeconomic status because they tend to pursue longer education and are relatively more likely to attend more expensive faculties, such as medicine (European Commission, European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2022).

So, not only is unconditional equality of opportunity insufficient to achieve real equality, and therefore equity, in higher education, but there is strong

evidence that it may hinder it (European Commission, European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2022).

According to Bush and Trani (2021), it is crucial to be flexible and actively eliminate all forms of visible and invisible discriminatory practices that harm various student groups, while occasionally allowing unequal treatment of unequal groups of students if it helps to correct mistakes or injustices committed at earlier levels of education.

We need to put inclusion at the heart of everything we do by embedding equality and diversity in our organisational structures, policies, processes, and procedures, and ensuring that we 'live' our values in practice. We then need to attract, retain, develop, and support a truly diverse staff and student body, and ensure that we are all aware of our personal responsibility to promote equality, diversity, and inclusion (Bush & Trani, 2021).

Authors Janebova et al. (2021) consider that the first step towards inclusive higher education is to ask honest, uncomfortable questions about why education in our institutions is not inclusive. They point out that searching for answers might be discomfoting and will probably be dependent on national, cultural, and institutional contexts. Asking such questions requires courage, honesty, and empathy. The answers might reveal unspoken power structures or cultural biases that we may not want to acknowledge. But only when these questions are asked and answered, can we make our institutions more inclusive.

The social dimension should interconnect the principles of accessibility, equity, diversity, and inclusion into all laws, policies, and practices (Ščukanec, 2020). It is important to ensure a holistic approach to the social dimension,

aiming to create coherent policies from early childhood education, through schooling to higher education, and throughout lifelong learning. This requires more connectivity between the work of those responsible for higher education and other ministries and sectors, which can bring about change only through a joint effort.

Higher education institutions need to strengthen their capacity in responding to the needs of a more diverse student and staff body, particularly through improving initial and continuing professional training for academic and administrative staff. Effective counselling and guidance for potential and enrolled students should help widen their access to, participation in, and completion of higher education studies. International mobility programmes in higher education should be structured and implemented in a way that fosters diversity, equity, and inclusion (Ščukanec, 2020).

Community engagement should be considered as a process whereby higher education institutions engage with external community stakeholders to undertake joint activities that can be mutually beneficial. Like social dimension policies, community engagement should be embedded in the core missions of higher education. Such engagement provides a holistic basis on which universities can address a broad range of societal needs, including those of vulnerable, disadvantaged, and underrepresented groups while enriching their teaching, research, and other core functions (Ščukanec, 2020).

In 2014, the Development Strategy for Student Support at the University of Zagreb until 2025 (University of Zagreb, 2014) was adopted, which states, among other things, that students will be supported in extracurricular activities

which will contribute to better achievement of learning outcomes, employability, and personal development.

The Centre for Student Counselling and Support at the University of Zagreb was also established as a unique information center available to students from all faculties and academies. The Centre united student support activities towards information, counselling, and education in the following areas:

- academic skills development,
- career development and management, including professional practice guidance,
- development of communication and social-emotional skills,
- counselling for personal and academic difficulties,
- support for students with disabilities,
- mental health services,
- health care support,
- support for underrepresented and other groups of students requiring additional support,
- support for the teaching, professional, and administrative staff of the University of Zagreb in relation to the aforementioned student services,
- other areas as identified based on student needs and decisions made by the University Senate.

Authors Puzić et al. (2020) conducted a study with the aim of understanding the needs of students from underrepresented and vulnerable groups, in relation to their studies. They focused on several groups of students that had been less researched in the past and identified recommendations to enhance the study conditions for these groups. Here are three examples:

Refugees and asylum seekers:

- improve the availability of information about studying in Croatia,
- clearly define the procedures for admission to higher education institutions and make them easily accessible,
- enhance the availability of information on scholarship opportunities,
- organise preparatory courses in the Croatian language at the university level,
- introduction of a "peer" counselling system, where students with similar experiences can provide advice to other students.

LGBT+ students:

- provide psychological counselling for LGBT+ persons at all levels of education,
- establish offices of psychological and counselling support at all universities,
- encourage the establishment of LGBT+ student associations at all universities,
- promote the introduction of LGBT+-sensitive curricula and raise awareness among university staff about the issues faced by LGBT+ students,
- ensure synergy between educational institutions, relevant government institutions, LGBT+ NGOs, and the media in developing policies and implementing equality for LGBT+ people in higher education and education in general.

Female students in technical fields:

- organising educational activities for male and female students of primary and secondary schools with the aim of breaking down gender stereotypes related to different professions and areas of human activity,
- providing earlier vocational orientation and counselling during high school,
- organising training for university teachers to break down gender stereotypes,
- introducing disciplinary regulations at universities, specifying sanctions for university teachers who behave inappropriately (for example, if they treat female students differently than male students, make inappropriate comments, have different educational expectations, etc.).

In December 2018, the Government of the Republic of Croatia adopted the National Plan for the Improvement of the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia 2019-2021. The plan contained six goals with a whole set of sub-goals, listed activities, responsible institutions and organisations, and implementation indicators. The goals were as follows:

- systematically collecting and processing data relevant to improving the social dimension of higher education and using them for this purpose,
- improve access to higher education for underrepresented and vulnerable groups and remove barriers to access,
- ensuring equal opportunities for all students during their studies,
- increase graduation rates and employment of underrepresented and vulnerable groups upon graduation,

- improve the system of financial support for members of underrepresented and vulnerable groups,
- the quality assurance system includes standards related to the social dimension of higher education.

As previously mentioned, finding solutions to the complex challenges posed by the nuances of inclusion in higher education requires innovative and continuous collaboration among institutions and organisations working in academia at the local, national, and international levels (Delap & Ferencz, 2021).

Indeed, the complexity of fostering inclusion in higher education requires a multi-faceted approach. Merely increasing funding may not be sufficient. Instead, it entails having knowledgeable staff who can thoroughly analyse the student population and comprehend their unique needs. Finding qualified and compassionate individuals within universities who are driven to support underrepresented students in overcoming obstacles is crucial. Moreover, creating open connections between diverse groups of students fosters an inclusive and welcoming environment (Delap & Ferencz, 2021).

For example, when we talk about students with disabilities, they are only one of the stakeholders in their higher education. Other important stakeholders are university teachers, administrative and professional staff in higher education (staff in libraries, departments, administrative and support services), fellow students, experts and institutions of practice (workshops, practical work, on-site teaching), other services (canteens, dormitories, cultural and sports facilities), the local community (transportation, access to facilities, universal design), the state/ministries (scholarships, transportation allowance, personal

assistance, personal disability allowance), and NGOs (information, fight for rights, provision of services). All should take responsibility for their part of obligations in higher education and work well together if the studies of students with disabilities are to be successful.

The fact that we may not have discovered people with fewer opportunities in our educational institutions is no excuse for inaction. Maybe they really do not exist or we just do not know about them, but by creating an inclusive atmosphere in our higher education institutions, we show them that they are welcome. Our job is to provide opportunities, to give chances, to accept, and it is up to the students themselves to decide if they want to "declare" themselves as belonging to a marginalised group and take advantage of the support we offer. If they do, it is a sign that we are on the right track. Likewise, if we notice a continuing reluctance of students to "declare" themselves, we should look into possible reasons why they might not feel safe or comfortable enough to do so.

If universities embrace student diversity, unpack the details about it, and engage in cooperation with students, many possible solutions can be created (e.g., enrolment quotas, enrolment priority, scholarships and cost subsidies, housing, transportation support system, psychological, academic, career, and other support). There is no one-size-fits-all approach, and regardless of the struggles, universities can always find a way to give underrepresented students equitable access to a life-changing educational experience and support them in that (Hovhannisyan, 2021).

We must be completely honest in what we do. If we strip education of the social experience, the relationship between teachers and students, all that

remains is fragmented teaching. Education does not exist outside of relationships and reality. We are talking about the hidden curriculum, a concept introduced by researcher Phillip Jackson in 1968 (Betkowski, 2023). The hidden curriculum is what educators convey to students through their interactions, by their example, and the school or classroom culture without being aware of it; it consists of unspoken values, beliefs, norms, and culture, including inclusion. If we do not treat our students as we teach them to treat others, our teaching is not authentic, valid, or persuasive. If we ourselves are not inclusive, we cannot teach and persuade anyone to practice inclusion.

So, we all need to make decisions in our areas for which we are responsible and make the necessary changes to promote inclusion. These changes must come from the bottom up, with students being the agents of change. Students are important; they are participants in the educational system who should decide about their education and improve it. Before making conclusions, proposals, procedures, or providing support for their education, we should always ask the students about it.

However, simply occasionally consulting students from groups facing barriers or only including them at the beginning of the decision-making process, but then proceeding to act without them in further stages is not enough. As previously mentioned, true inclusive practice relies on an inclusive mindset and philosophy. In other words, we must be willing to work with students from various marginalised groups instead of simply for them, involving them in each step of the decision-making process as well as approaching them as equals in this setting. It also requires us to challenge our own professional

identities as “experts” and the position of power or supremacy that comes with it.

Thus, it is necessary that we are constantly on the outlook for new inclusion practices or modes of ensuring a truer, more comprehensive inclusion process. These new models are often found not in the current academic circles, but rather in the marginalised/underrepresented/vulnerable communities themselves, among activists and experts belonging to these groups. Examples of such models include lived experience informed practice and co-production.

Lived experience informed practice is a model that considers the research evidence but emphasises the lived experience of the individuals and communities we are trying to include and engage. It is a response to the limitations and biases of the evidence-based approach, especially when it comes to the field of social sciences and helping professions (Wise, 2023). If considered in the context of this paper and the aforementioned need for an individualised approach when trying to ensure a more inclusive social dimension of higher education, this model offers a new framework that is in line with the ideas proposed elsewhere in this text. While research is important because it offers a specific type of data overview, it is impossible to create truly inclusive, individualised support systems without considering the lived experiences of those we are trying to support.

In turn, co-production is a concept that could be said to build on lived experience-based practice. Makey et al. (2022) define it as a process adopted in health, social care, research, policy development, and higher education that aims to bring together the skills and experiences of service users and professionals. It has a range of advantages, such as enabling users of a service

to have a voice and to equalise power among service users, professionals, and leaders. In other words, co-production can be viewed as a practical application extension of the well-known motto of the disability rights movement "nothing about us without us." Simply put and applied to the context of the social dimension of higher education, it is a collaboration on and co-creation of an inclusive environment that not only accounts for diversity but actively engages with it in a constructive manner.

And, for the end, as authors Janebova et al. (2021) remind us, we must bear in mind that inclusive education is not an outcome, but a process that is constantly revised and reconsidered. We can never be fully inclusive, but we can get close to it. There will always be new questions and challenges. It is a never-ending process. So, there is no end point to inclusion, but a cycle of effort, critical reflection, further change, and hope (Janebova et al. 2021).

The effort is truly worth it because very often the impact of the opportunities, education, and mobility provided is much more significant for people with fewer opportunities than for the typical population. All efforts to achieve inclusion, equity, and fairness in higher education are worthwhile because higher education has a mission to change society, to make it better. Let's do it!

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