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The reconfiguration of the Croatian higher education area: discourses and practices

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Introduction – *transition and reconfiguration*

Croatia's transition from socialism towards a vision of Western European democracy has been characterised by phrases such as "democracy-in-the-making" and "transitional country" (Spajić-Vrkaš 2003: 33) in order to encapsulate the process of introducing democracy to the country's political, economic and social structures. These local societal changes, as well as the global transformations that affect them, have also found their expressions in the Croatian higher education (HE) system. For example, the 1996 Act on higher education institutions enabled the emergence of a private HE sector in Croatia. Furthermore, as indicated in an OECD (2006) report on tertiary education in Croatia, preparations for Croatia's accession to the European Union have formed the context for various structural reforms in the Croatian HE area. Thus, just like Babić, Matković and Šošić (2006) have observed, the Croatian HE system has itself been in a process of transition though one which has been reflecting, rather than shaping, changes in the wider social context.

This paper addresses key aspects of both the discursive and practical reconfiguration of contemporary Croatian higher education. The discursive reconfiguration is discussed in terms of the dominant government market discourse applied to higher education which suggests that higher education institutions and the individuals that constitute them should undergo economic introspection in order to respond to the demands of a knowledge-based economy. Student protests in Croatia are highlighted as an act of resistance to the market discourse and the resulting changes in practice, with special attention given to the students' protest manifesto and its refutation of a neo-liberal understanding of education as a private good.

The practical reconfiguration critically discussed includes the introduction of Bologna process objectives into the Croatian higher education system. The implementation of these objectives can be traced to the academic year 2005/2006 with the enrolment of the first "Bologna generation" of students. A particular focus of this section is on the observed national educational policy indifference towards the "social dimension" as spelled out in Bologna documents, as well as the formulaic implementation of other Bologna objectives which have often passed unaccompanied by crucial context-specific changes, such as university integration, which act as prerequisites for substantive systemic reform. The paper argues that government attentiveness to university autonomy, a more ambitious role for the Croatian higher education area at both the individual and societal level that goes beyond market logic, stakeholder partnerships, increased investments in science and education, as well as policies addressing social inequalities and substantive local issues in higher education remain significant challenges for the Croatian higher education system.

Changing values

The Croatian educational system has been given a central role in Croatian government documents such as the *Strategic Development Framework for 2006-2013 (SDF)*. However, this centrality can be interpreted as "subordinate": it exists exclusively in terms of the educational system's contribution to a competitive

economy positioned in the document as the country's key target. Extracts from the document illustrate this point: "*A variable which proves to be an important determinant of growth in all research is human capital or education. Education has a strong and universal influence on economic growth*" (SDF 2006: 5), and "*An important characteristic of the Croatian labour market is a relatively weak link between educational outcomes and labour market needs; in other words there is an insufficient impact of the labour market (i.e. the needs of the labour market) on the educational system*" (SDF 2006: 13). The Croatian higher education system is particularly singled out in this market-education "partnership" in the following manner: "*The higher education system is a special challenge for the knowledge society because it produces the highest quality workforce for the economy*" (2006: 17). Drawing on Nussbaum's (2010: 7) distinction between "education for profit" and "education for inclusive citizenship", which includes critical thought, a daring imagination, empathetic understanding and understanding of the complexity of the world we live in, it is quite clear that the Croatian HE system is constructed in one the main strategic documents in terms of the former rather than latter.

Such discursive framing of market-education links in government documents has several practical repercussions. One such repercussion is that the government has emphasised the importance of increasing the proportion of people with completed higher education (according to the last national census in 2001 (Croatian Bureau of Statistics) 11.9 per cent of the population had completed tertiary education). However, such a target is not accompanied by sufficient public expenditure on higher education: Eurostat data for 2007 shows that whereas Sweden for example invests 1.77 per cent of its GDP into HE, Austria 1.50 per cent, Slovenia 1.21 per cent, Germany 1.14 per cent and Hungary 1.03 per cent, Croatia's public investment into HE as a proportion of its GDP is the lowest at 0.81 per cent. Among other implications, increased numbers of students in HE yet insufficient public expenditure on HE has meant increasing private investments in education in the form of tuition fees. In other words, similarly to Robertson's (2010: 201) observation for the UK context, higher education in Croatia is expected to play a significant role in advancing global competitiveness but within a context of constrained public spending.

A further practical repercussion of such an economic growth driven conceptualization of education relates to the goal of teaching at the university becoming rather narrow: provision of workers for the market economy. Again Nussbaum (2010: 2) powerfully captures the threat of this national priority when she states that:

> "*Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements*".

Similarly to this re-conceptualisation of teaching aims, the role of research at universities in terms of Croatia's strategic development becomes equally narrow: "*encouraging the commercialisation of academic research – with the aim of effective cooperation between university and research institutions and business structures*" (SDF 2006: 21). Croatia's official *Science and technology policy 2006-2010* (SDF 2006: 5) reinforces this by stating the following: "*Science has a key contribution to knowledge-based economies by generating new ideas and technological solutions. In the knowledge economy it is equally important for science research findings to be turned into successful commercial products*." A final practical repercussion to be mentioned here includes suggestions that funding arrangements will follow such priorities. The *Strategic Development Framework for 2006-2013* document states that the aim is to "*harmonize areas of research interest and work which are being funded from the state budget with the aim of complete knowledge transfer for the development of the economy and society in general*" (p.20). A chapter of the document entitled "science, technology and ICT" suggests what these priority areas are and raises concerns about the funding

of academic areas which do not have economic profit at their core. According to Nussbaum (2010: 2), the humanities and arts are seen by policy makers as "useless frills".

The title of this paper "The reconfiguration of the Croatian higher education area" implies what Ball (1997: 263) describes as "*a move from one state of affairs with a set of dominant characteristics, to a new state of affairs with a different, mutually exclusive set of dominant characteristics*". In the context of changing values in the Croatian HE system this move has entailed what John Krejsler of the Danish University of Education (2006: 6) has captured as follows:

> "*the university has been discursively dislodged from being an autonomous institution within the framework of state tutelage to being an organisation with self-ownership that has to be attentive to stakeholders' and consumers' demands on market-like conditions*".

An example of what is meant by "autonomy" in the HE context can be found in the Magna Charta Universitatum (1988), a document about fundamental university values and rights signed by 388 university chancellors from across the world in Bologna; this document maintains that research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power. Excerpts from Croatia's *Framework for Development* presented earlier, with their focus on the relationship between the economy and higher education sector, illustrate a discourse which threatens such autonomy. Developed by a conservative government which has dominated the political scene since Croatia's independence, this discourse resonates with Robertson's (2010) description of New Labour's 1998 White Paper *Our Competitive Future: Building the knowledge driven economy.* According to Robertson (2010: 195), this document framed universities as central engines in building the knowledge-driven economy and represented competition as including new ways of funding which promote the commercialisation of university research.

Changing *subjectivities*

Apart from the indicated macro-level "ethical retooling" (Ball 1997) of Croatian HE, the market discourse in government documents relating to HE also necessarily entails the formation of new professional "subjectivities". According to Ball (1997: 263), the market form and competition as well as various commodifications have the following implication: "*It is not simply that what we do is changed; who we are, the possibilities for who we might become, are also changed*". However, these changes to professional subjectivities have not remained unchallenged by pockets of resistance of both students and academic staff within the Croatian academic community.

The market discourse met resistance from students most explicitly in the spring of 2009 when the Right to Education protests began with their epicentre at the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. On the one hand, the protests were motivated by a particularistic interest: students demanded the abolishment of tuition fees at all levels of higher education (undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate)[1]. However, what was particularly significant about the protests was their pronounced

[1] The proportion of students paying tuition fees in Croatian HE has increased dramatically over the last decade. According to 2009/2010 data from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 60 per cent of all students enrolled at Croatian higher education institutions paid tuition fees. Tuition fees charged up to the academic year 2010/11 fell between 750-1270 EUR (Doolan, Dolenec, Domazet 2010). Until very recently, a student's fee status was determined initially at enrolment into a university (based on his or her ranking position at entry, calculated primarily on the basis of secondary school academic results and success at the entrance exam, i.e. merit based). Now however, based on the Science and Education Minister's decision in spring 2010 to fully subsidize the first year of undergraduate studies, all students who enter the full enrolment quota for the academic year 2010/11 will pay no fees during the first year of studies. After that they will pay tuition fees according to a linear model based on accumulated ECTS points. This essentially means that the sole criteria for fee paying status is academic, while a student's social status plays no part (Doolan, Dolenec, Domazet 2010: 39).

ideological resistance to neoliberalism and its commodification of public goods, i.e. the protests went beyond the immediate concerns of HE.

The protesters' counter market HE discourse (which had its roots in a human rights discourse) was visible in banners such as "Knowledge is not a commodity" and "Education is not for sale". Broader concerns were reflected in the choice of lectures organized by students during their 35 day takeover of the faculty building, which included topics such as healthcare provision and sustainable development, as well as their selection of films played during this time: "Money as debt", "Take the money and run" and "Sicko". These broader concerns are still reflected on the students' webpage, which has a section called "'Worker's rights" where students have expressed their support for worker's protests in Croatia. An example of such solidarity in practice was when students joined in the farmer's strike in Croatia in June 2009, and in September 2010 supported the strike of workers in the Kamensko textile company who had not received their salary for five consecutive months.

The following excerpts from the students' manifesto capture the students' reaction against the commodification of public goods and the neo-liberal ethic of individualism:

> "*During the action we will block the teaching process and prepare ourselves for future actions directed towards protecting society from further commercialization by organising various public talks and lectures."*
>
> *"We deem it important to give back dignity to the idea of collective interests and social solidarity, against the representational-media culture of the cult of individualism…we see this as an ideologically problematic representational model of social processes with far-reaching political consequences, which include the abolishment of social rights and institutions of social solidarity."*

As the selected quotes illustrate, the protests represented resistance to the broader societal order in Croatia, and also implicitly resistance to its effects on the HE system as a whole, as well as resistance to the impact this has on the individual level, i.e. changing subjectivities related to "the cult of individualism" and the "individual-as-consumer" ideology.

A further important issue that was raised by the student protests is the lack of stakeholder partnerships and forums where systemic changes could be discussed and challenged. To illustrate this point, the student manifesto stated:

> "*there is no real power to influence questions directly related to the status and future of students through formal representational mechanisms*."
>
> "*Among other reasons, we start this action because the space and time for free discussions on significant changes in education, and society in general, are otherwise limited."*

In other words, students voiced their criticism that they are not recognised as equal partners in decisions shaping their higher education experience.

The student protests signal an important moment in contemporary Croatian society since they can be interpreted as the first organised publicly-expressed ideological resistance to aspects of Croatia's political and economic order which started its development in 1991. However, although the protests were successful in communicating criticism to the neoliberal agenda, what they arguably lacked was a vision of a contemporary alternative. For instance, there was criticism of the self-interested individualistic discourse which was juxtaposed to social solidarity, but the criticism remained at that level. Here a richer account of alternatives drawing perhaps on Nussbaum's or Sen's work could have been beneficial. Nussbaum (2010)

for example identifies three capabilities citizens need in the 21st century: capacity for self-examination and critical thinking, a sense of global citizenship combined with a sense of human dignity, and empathy. For Nussbaum, the "urgency of economic growth" sidesteps these priorities. Similarly, Sen's (e.g. 1999) capability approach develops the value of people as ends in themselves rather than just tools for economic growth.

Apart from these student protests, reactions from the academic community to proposed changes in the Croatian HE system have been most notable since October 2010 when an initiative called "Academic Solidarity" (gathering mostly academic staff and students) published its reaction to the proposed new laws on science, higher education and the university which were made public by the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports in autumn 2010. These proposals were rejected by the initiative as an attempt to further commercialize science and higher education in Croatia (subordinating it to the interests of capital) and as a breach of university autonomy (e.g. proposal to include government officials in university governing bodies). The reaction was followed up at the beginning of February 2011 with the initiative's media brief which demanded that any new laws on science and higher education should be based on the following four principles: science and education need to benefit society as a whole and not just private capital, science should be based on cooperation and not competition, higher education needs to be publicly funded and accessible to all, and academic governance needs to be fully transparent and ensured from below rather than politically intervened with. As one can gather, both the student protests and the Academic Solidarity initiative draw on a similar vocabulary of cooperation, autonomy and education as a public good[2].

The following sections move the discussion of values and subjectivities to the structural reconfiguration of the higher education system in Croatia along Bologna process guidelines. Although the discourse of Bologna process documents also merits discussion (Tomić-Koludrović (2009), for example, notes that opponents of the Bologna process see it as "*a clear sign of the introduction of neo-liberal principles into contemporary European educational and research practices*" and Fairclough and Wodak (2008) argue that the Bologna declaration promotes a "competition university") the focus of the following sections is on the technicalities of implementation.

The Bologna process – a Croatian interpretation

The key policy framework for the reconfiguration of Croatian HE has been provided by Bologna process objectives as spelled out in documents developed by education ministers from across Europe beginning with the 1999 Bologna Declaration through to the Leuven Communiqué of 2009[3]. Implementation of these objectives can be observed in Croatia from the academic year 2005/2006 when the first "Bologna generation" enrolled into HE. Implemented structural reforms have included the adoption of a system of easily readable and recognizable degrees, supported with the introduction of a Diploma Supplement; the adoption of a three-cycle system of studying: undergraduate (3-4 years of study), graduate (1-2 years of study) and postgraduate (3 years of study); the establishment of a system of credits as proposed through the European Credit Transfer System; and, finally, the introduction of external quality assurance procedures, to be carried out by the Croatian National Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education established in 2004. Such reforms have been described in Bologna policy documents as of "primary relevance" (Bologna declaration 1999: 3) in order to establish the European area of higher education as a site of student and staff mobility.

The Croatian legal framework for such reform was provided in July 2003 when the Scientific Activity and Higher Education Act was passed in Parliament. However, as Sabatier (1986: 25) points out, the effective

[2] A contributing factor to such discursive overlap could be that many proponents of the student protests are also part of the Academic Solidarity initiative.

[3] Croatia signed the Bologna declaration at the meeting of European Ministers in charge of Higher Education in Prague, 2001.

implementation of legal objectives is hardly straightforward and depends on several variables including the clarity and consistency of objectives, adequate causal theory, legal structuring of the implementation process to enhance compliance by implementing officials and target groups, committed and skilful implementing officials, supportive interest groups (stakeholders) and, in the case of changes to socio-economic conditions, those which do not substantially undermine political support or causal theory. Inspired by this classification of significant policy variables, this section of the paper argues that although compliance to the implementation of Bologna objectives in Croatian HE was legally ensured, disinterestedness or resistance of implementing officials and stakeholders has generally resulted in what McLaughlin (1991, as cited in Ball 1997: 261) refers to as "reorientation change", which absorbs the language of reform and not its substance, as opposed to "colonisation change", which involves "major shifts in the cultural core of the organisation".

The points made in this section are largely based on findings from an empirical study conducted in 2006/2007 which involved a questionnaire completed by 642 first year students at six case study faculties within Croatia's largest university, the University of Zagreb, in-depth interviews with 28 of these students and interviews with 13 lecturers and university management staff (the lecturers were from the same six institutions as the students)[4]. This section largely draws on the responses of the interviewed lecturers (as the implementing officials) with the aim of illustrating some of the issues related to first experiences with the implementation of Bologna policy guidelines. These issues may still be part of the system today and as such will need addressing in future policy reformulations. The section allows itself an assessment of how successful the implementation of these objectives was in the first two years of implementation; however, it recognises, in line with Sabatier's (1986) recommendation, that the time required for a serious assessment of the success of policy implementation is approximately ten years.

Meanings of the Bologna process and the success of its implementation

The meanings that interviewed academic staff gave to the Bologna process can be placed into two groups: those related explicitly to Bologna policy guidelines, as pronounced in key Bologna documents, and those which are related to quality in HE in more general terms. The first group concerns ECTS, the three-cycle system of HE, quality assurance procedures and mobility, whereas the second group concerns working in small groups, problem solving, mentorship and equipment. In other words, under the umbrella term of the Bologna process, academic staff mentioned issues which go beyond Bologna guidelines as pronounced in Bologna process declarations and communiqués, suggesting that the Bologna reform was framed in much broader terms in the Croatian context than European documents suggest.

Similarly, students mentioned large groups, frequent testing and the subjectivity of lecturers when giving marks to students as part of the Bologna process rather than ECTS or the three-cycle system of studying. The students blamed the Bologna process for anything they were dissatisfied with, including many aspects of their course of study that existed before the implementation of Bologna guidelines (e.g. large groups). There was the suggestion in the student interviews that lecturers could be reinforcing this negative attitude towards the Bologna process. To illustrate this, a student said: "*professors tell us that studying was much better before, before Bologna.*"

Judging by the conducted interviews with lecturers, teaching staff were indeed dissatisfied with the implementation of the Bologna process. Selected interview extracts suggest this dissatisfaction:

> *"And you will always have nice reports and how it's all wonderful and how everything works here, but the question is what it's like in reality"*
> *"I hear from colleagues who work at other faculties that the exterior has changed, but not the essence"*

[4] The research was conducted as part of the "European university standards and the Croatian higher education system" project carried out at the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, Centre for Educational Research and Development, between 2004 and 2007. The project's team included Prof.dr. Gvozden Flego, Danijela Dolenec, MSc and Dr Karin Doolan.

"I think a lot has changed cosmetically, but in practice very few faculties are truly adjusting to it"
"If you ask me I don't think this Bologna was prepared well enough and it was implemented too fast and without caution, without caution isn't the right the word, it was a rash decision I would say. That's why most of the undergraduate programmes have stayed as the previous ones were."

The general impression the interviewed lecturers gave was that the implementation of Bologna process guidelines was rushed and superficial, i.e. that the vocabulary and structural changes of the Bologna process were implemented at their faculties, but there was no substantive change to the fabric of their institutions. This takes us back to McLaughlin's (1991, as cited in Ball 1997) term "reorientation change" as insubstantial reform in comparison to "colonisation change" which includes changes in institutional culture. According to Sabatier (1986) a contributing factor to successful policy implementation are committed and skilful implementing officials. However, a large part of the Croatian community has its reservations towards reform. For Vizek Vidović (2008: 11), this anxiety about reforms was partly caused by "*the lack of a national strategy laying out the main changes, deadlines, and responsibilities of parties, as well as guarantees of adequate financial support from the government*."

Specificities of Bologna process implementation

The reported superficiality of the Bologna process implementation can be seen in responses lecturers gave to the implementation of specific Bologna guidelines: the three-cycle system of studying, ECTS, mobility and quality assurance.

With regard to the three-cycle system of studying, several of the interviewed lecturers expressed their doubts about the cycle system that was selected for the programmes they were teaching on (either 3+2+3 or 4+1+3 or 6+0+3). An excerpt from an interview with a lecturer illustrates this: "*What horrified me most with the Bologna process was the pressure to end the first level of higher education after three years.*" A related repercussion of this reduction in what used to be four-year undergraduate courses to three-year courses pertains to the content of that programme. According to the interviewed lecturers, this reduction meant that courses which used to last for a full academic year were now being taught in a semester. The change was criticised as negative for two main reasons: either the content of the course had been reduced, which has resulted in a lower quality of course provision, or the content had not been reduced but had rather been compiled differently in order to "fit" into one semester, which presents a substantial workload for students.

The European Commission's Flash Eurobarometer (2007) on the perceptions of higher education reform among teaching professionals (in Croatia 138 members of staff completed the survey) showed that Croatian staff strongly supported the introduction of ECTS points. However, the way in which ECTS points were assigned to different subjects was criticised in the study reported here. It seems that, for certain programmes, ECTS points per subject were not calculated according to student workload but were rather assigned according to the seniority of the person teaching the subject (as one lecturer put it "*faculties are a very sensitive harmony of departments and programmes*"). Certain faculties also introduced their own system of assigning points which can be illustrated as follows: "*all subjects have the same number of ECTS points irrespective of what they are like. So, student workload was not calculated but rather ECTS points were distributed linearly.*" However, good practice cases were also mentioned in the interviews. The following extract illustrates this:

"we could talk about it, that is we would sit, have meetings and then we would suggest, an ECTS point is connected to the workload a student can have per week, per semester and then we knew what the basis was, what the fundamental subjects were, which were the important ones which require more energy and then those subjects got more ECTS points".

One of the lecturers recommended that a questionnaire should be administered to students in order to evaluate whether they think that the ECTS allocation makes sense or "*whether we possibly made a mistake.*"

Quality assurance was another issue raised by lecturers in relation to the implementation of Bologna process guidelines. Internal boards for quality assurance and student evaluations of courses and teaching have been a legal obligation for universities since the 2003 Act on Scientific Activity and Higher Education. However, one lecturer expressed his concern that quality assurance was being equated with student feedback forms: "*one of the things that Bologna should change is the situation with quality assurance but quality assurance is seen here as student feedback forms.*" Concerns raised with student feedback forms included their content and the way in which they were being administered, as well as the lack of any impact of student feedback on teaching. The uniformity of the content was criticised by several lecturers (*"I don't think it's good that we have feedback forms which are the same for all subjects"*), as was the unstandardised administration of the feedback forms: for example, some departments administered them after exams, and others during the last lesson. The lack of impact of student feedback was raised as particularly problematic by several lecturers:

> *"It's only the professor who got bad marks who knows he got them, and the department chair, there are no pluses nor minuses for what you did do well or badly so it's not stimulating."*

> *"I think it's important that students don't have a feeling it's just about the Bologna process and you have to fill in the feedback forms as part of that, but that they simply feel that they have the opportunity to change something. And they will feel that if someone introduces them to it all and what the consequences and results are".*

These quotes suggest that student feedback forms are treated as a formality at certain departments rather than as a way of actively improving the students' learning experience.

The European Commission's Flash Eurobarometer (2007) showed that 68.9 per cent of the surveyed Croatian staff agreed that mobility should be an obligatory part of the curriculum for all students. Mobility as an end product of the Bologna process was also mentioned as relevant by several of the interviewed lecturers at the University of Zagreb. However, these lecturers also pointed out the barriers to mobility. One interviewee said: "*It's all nice, you have Bologna, and then you stay at home.*" Financial barriers were related to lack of funding for mobility and academic barriers were mentioned both in relation to students and staff. For example, the incompatibility of academic programmes was mentioned as a barrier for student mobility both within Croatia and abroad, and lack of adequate replacements for academic staff was mentioned as a barrier for teacher mobility: "*I would like to spend 2, 3 months or a semester somewhere else, teaching and learning. But it's ridiculous for me to leave when I am the only one qualified to teach this.*" Such concerns were also identified in a research study which specifically focused on the prerequisites for the mobility of Croatian academic staff and students (Dolenec, Doolan 2008). Together with financial and academic barriers, this study also identified the importance of raising institutional capacities for mobility (e.g. more administrative staff working on mobility, improved communication channels, signed bilateral and multilateral university agreements).

A consideration of the implementation of specific Bologna policy guidelines indicates weaknesses in relation to the appropriateness of the three-cycle choices made, the correctness of allocated ECTS points, the possibilities of academic mobility and the quality of the quality assurance system. However, this section has focused only on Bologna policy guidelines which have been addressed in Croatia. The following section, on the other hand, discusses a Bologna policy guideline which has remained neglected: the "social dimension".

What about the social dimension?

Unlike the more organisational (ECTS, three-cycle system) aspects of the Bologna process, the "social dimension" in Bologna documents draws attention to equal access, progress and completion opportunities in HE with particular focus on socio-economically disadvantaged students. The Berlin Communiqué (2003: 5) defines the social dimension as follows:

> *"Ministers stress the need for appropriate studying and living conditions for students, so that they can successfully complete their studies within an appropriate period of time without obstacles related to their social and economic background."*

In the same tone, according to the more recent Leuven Communiqué (2009: 2): *"access into higher education should be widened by fostering the potential of students from underrepresented groups and by providing adequate conditions for the completion of their studies.*" In other words, the social dimension of the Bologna process introduces a social justice agenda to the prevailing economic and political justification for the Bologna HE reform. Indeed, according to Kladis (2003: 354), a conclusion of the Bologna Follow-Up Seminar in Athens in 2003 was that the social dimension "*should aim at reducing the social gap and at strengthening social cohesion both at national and at European level*".

However, the only reference to the social dimension in the Croatian Act on Scientific Activity and Higher Education (2003) concerns access to HE: an article in the Act states that higher education institutions should determine the procedure for selecting candidates in a manner that guarantees the equality of all candidates irrespective of their race, gender, language, religion, political or other beliefs, national or social origin, assets, birth, social status, disability, sexual orientation or age (para.77). While this article is more encompassing with regard to risk factors than those expressed in the social dimension of the Bologna process, which focuses on socio-economic characteristics, the emphasis on access overlooks the social determinants of progress and completion. In addition, the equal rights perspective taken in the Croatian act is not accompanied by any measures which would enable the exercise of these rights. This supports Ball's (2008) conclusion that equity is rarely a chief goal of education policy.

Indeed, in practice measures seem to be working against equal educational opportunities. To illustrate this, whereas in 1993/1994 the government paid for the tuition fees of 88.2 per cent of students, in 2009/2010 60 per cent of students were fee-paying; the increase in student numbers has not been accompanied by an increase in public spending on their education. Furthermore, until the academic year 2010/2011, when the Science and Education Minister's decision was made to fully subsidize the first year of undergraduate studies, determination of fee paying status was based primarily on academic criteria (previous secondary school results, state matura exam results, entrance exam results); in other words, there was no socially sensitive aspect to fee determination. This merit based system is also furthered in the latest decision whereby although all undergraduate students will not pay fees in the first instance (which is a positive contribution to equal opportunities), they will start paying fees according to how successfully they progress through their studies irrespective of social criteria. The assumption underlying this decision is that single parents or students who have to work during their studies to support themselves have equal chances of success as students from socio-economically advantaged backgrounds with no family responsibilities.

Scholarships to support at-risk groups of students are a contribution to ensuring equal opportunities. However, according to Farnell and Kovač (2010: 268), there are 10,000 state scholarships which support 6.74 per cent of the Croatian student population and in 2008 70 per cent of these state scholarships were merit based. In other words, only 30 per cent of state scholarships are needs based. In addition, the amount of these scholarship funds is also deemed insufficient: Farnell and Kovač (2010: 268) report that these scholarship funds amount to between 500-800 kuna per month (1 HRK = 0.135049 EUR approx.). The increase in the number of students paying tuition fees, where the tuition fees are primarily academically

defined, as well as limited and low funding opportunities, suggest that socially sensitive educational policies are not a priority in the Croatian HE context.

The lack of regard to ensuring equal opportunities in HE in Croatia reflects a lack of research on HE access and progress. An OECD (2006: 45) report captures this in the following statement: "*There are few data on the characteristics of those who enter tertiary education…it is not known whether there is a significant differential access rate by social class, or income*". Similarly, Croatia's report on the implementation of the Bologna process (Bologna process national report 2009: 43) indicates that:

> "*Recently there have been some studies published which indicate that the level of representation of students originating from lower income families may be lower than had been assumed until now. There is a need to collect further information in order to plan targeted activities.*"

It is expected that first Eurostudent data for Croatia, which is to be published in spring 2011, will contribute to an empirical basis for the social dimension. However, the scarce data currently available on the composition of the student body by parental educational level shows that the student profile does not mirror the wider social context, as can be seen from a comparison of the structure of the student body by father's educational level and the structure of the educational level of men aged 40-49 (according to the 2001 census), into which age cohort the fathers of the majority of observed students can be assumed to fall (Doolan 2010). Although the educational level of men aged 40-49 in the population can only be taken as an approximation for the educational level of students' fathers, the data show that second generation students (students whose fathers have completed tertiary education) constitute over a third of the total student population whereas only 16.3 per cent of men in the 40-49 age group have completed HE. On the other hand, around 7 per cent of students in the observed period had fathers who have completed up to secondary school education whereas 22.7 per cent of men in the 40-49 age group belong to this educational level. These results suggest that the odds of continuing to HE for students whose fathers have completed up to secondary schooling are significantly lower than for students whose fathers have an HE degree.

A further important issue in Croatian HE is that many of the enrolled students do not complete their enrolled course, and those who do study beyond the prescribed time frame. According to Van den Berg and Hofman (2005), "survival rates" are, for example, over 80 per cent in the UK and 35 per cent in Italy. In the Croatian HE context, data shows that over the 12 year period from 1991 to 2003, a total of 370,945 first-year students were enrolled in Croatian institutions of HE but as few as 117,527 students graduated in the same period, which constitutes only 31.7 per cent of the total number of enrolled first-year students (Babić 2005). In other words, Croatia's case is similar to Italy's with regard to low completion rates (although it is important to mention that this conclusion is based on pre-Bologna generations). In addition, Babić et al. (2006) report that Croatian students who graduated in 2004 on average studied 6.9 years for a university course. This is significantly higher than the Irish average study time of 3.1 years, higher than the Dutch (5.5 years) and German (5.3) average study time, yet lower than the Italian (7.5 years) (Van den Berg and Hofman 2005). As with the lack of research on HE access in Croatia, there is also a lack of research on why students do not complete their enrolled study course.

Based on this available data there seems to be a need to address the social dimension in Croatian HE. This need was also suggested in the student protests manifesto:

> *"In light of the fact that the right to education is a right that belongs to everyone, regardless ofthe economic status of the individual, our action is a sign of protest against the reckless and socially insensitive taking away of that right".*

The implementation of selected Bologna process guidelines, such as ECTS, the three-cycle system and quality assurance procedures, has meant a change in the institutional characteristics of Croatian higher education institutions[5]. However, according to some of the lecturers interviewed in 2007, these changes did not address certain crucial issues in the Croatian higher education system which would lead to more substantial change. To illustrate this, one lecturer said: "*All those things that were problematic before the Bologna process have stayed because it (the Bologna process) didn't touch upon those*". The following section addresses these local issues.

Local specificities

The issues lecturers addressed as requiring attention beyond general Bologna process guidelines included the lack of centralised governance at larger universities, instances of corruption, as well as specific academic, material and, related to these, financial challenges.

With regard to university integration, unlike the smaller universities which are centrally administered, the University of Zagreb, the largest Croatian university, has a reduced capacity for central administration. According to Vizek Vidović and Bjeliš (2006), this situation can be traced back to the mid 1970's when university faculties were given legal and financial autonomy. The authors claim that this decision has resulted in today's situation of functionally and financially highly fragmented universities with weak central steering capacities and an underdeveloped support infrastructure particularly related to institutional research, quality assurance and student support services. The following two excerpts from interviews with lecturers illustrate this point:

> "*Faculties are still where the power lies, where decisions are made and they are independent units. The university is just some kind of add-on which is of absolutely no use, it just takes the money. I know that they have great projects, international offices, but as a lecturer I don't see the benefits because the individual interests of faculties are much stronger."*

> *"The university is not making an effort to, it just takes over financial power, because the money goes to the university, but it doesn't take on any real power, i.e. the responsibility to coordinate the activities of faculties. So you have a powerless university which can't do anything, it has no control."*

According to Vizek Vidović (2008: 14), resistance to university integration from certain members of the academic community in Croatia relates to the impact this would have on the current internal flexibility of faculties as well as "awareness that institutional integration will bring about greater transparency of university functioning in general, with greater demands for demonstrating quality and accountability."

In relation to instances of corruption in the higher education system, these instances took central stage in Croatia in September 2008 when police raided several Croatian HE institutions as part of 'Operation Index', which was carried out by the Croatian police and the state attorney's office for fighting corruption and organised crime (USKOK). This is how the New York Times (September 20, 2008) reported the news:

> *The police raided several faculties in Zagreb on Thursday, confiscating computers and documents, and questioning dozens of professors who are suspected of taking bribes to give students passing grades. Mladen Bajić, the chief Croatian prosecutor, said investigators had collected evidence against 21 professors, 3 assistants and 4 university clerks.*

[5] The Croatian HE sector currently comprised of: 7 public universities and 1 private university, 11 public universities of applied sciences and 4 private universities of applied sciences, 4 public university colleges of applied sciences and 22 private university colleges of applied sciences (Doolan, Dolenec, Domazet 2010).

What the described situation suggests is that there are instances of corruption in the Croatian HE area, but also that measures are taken to counter them.

Finally, according to the interviewed lecturers, the Croatian higher education system requires the following academic and material improvements: more teaching staff (enabling teaching in smaller groups), continuous professional development of research, teaching and administrative staff, defining learning outcomes for each subject and course and developing students' generic skills ("*I think our goal should be to educate a student who can later decide what s/he wants to be rather than a specialist")*, more student support offices and better material conditions for leaning in the form of "more space" and equipment (e.g. well-equipped libraries).

The practical reconfiguration of the Croatian higher education area has been discussed in terms of the implementation of Bologna process guidelines. This reconfiguration has included a new three cycle system of studying, ECTS points and quality assurance mechanisms, all of which have contributed to Croatia's role in the harmonisation of the European higher education area. However, based on interviews with academic staff members, there seems to be a need for a policy reformulation phase in which these guidelines would be revisited and their implementation improved. In addition, certain open questions related to local HE specificities remain unaddressed yet warrant attention for any major improvements to the HE system to take place.

Conclusion: Thinking ahead

Diverse discourses are competing in the Croatian higher education area: competitiveness, entrepreneurship, market forces and consumers, as well as cooperation, solidarity, autonomy and citizenship. However, the proponents of these different discourses occupy different positions of power and in this power game the new "moral environment" (Ball 1997) of the Croatian higher education area seems to prioritize economic growth. Authors such as Nussbaum (2010: 15) question this rhetoric:

> *"producing economic growth does not mean producing democracy. Nor does it mean producing a healthy, engaged, educated population in which opportunities for a good life are available to all social classes."*

The tangible economic growth motivation that wishes to mobilize higher education for its profit making purposes is at risk of impinging on the autonomy (as freedom from economic and political powers) of the academic community. On a practical note, and especially in circumstances of constrained public funding for higher education in Croatia, this could mean directing public funding predominantly to education-for-profit over education for inclusive citizenship, a scenario which becomes particularly problematic without a sense of what such a "market mentality" (West 1999) could mean for the Croatian society in a long-term perspective. Indeed, there is a sense that Croatian authorities uncritically assume that such a "mentality", copy-pasted from countries with social and cultural circumstances very different to Croatia's, is the way forward irrespective of local specificities. But Croatia is neither Sweden nor England. The country has its own characteristics and not all education policies that exist in other countries can necessarily be successfully transplanted into the Croatian educational system.

The reconfiguration of the Croatian higher education area has also occurred along Bologna process lines: institutional changes necessary for Croatia's participation in the European higher education area have been implemented (e.g. three cycle system, ECTS, quality assurance mechanisms). However, a need for their further improvement as well as attention to the specificities of the Croatian higher education system (e.g. university integration, corruption, staffing, high non-completion rates) were identified as integral to substantial change. Judging by stakeholder reactions to the top-down approach associated with the Bologna process, one could conclude that basing policy on recommendations resulting from stakeholder partnerships

might be more conducive to such required substantive change; and in particular since the students and staff who participated in the research reported in this paper displayed a critical sense of themselves and the higher education setting in support of better working and studying conditions.

The direction of Croatian higher education proposed in this paper includes the following: government respect of university autonomy, a more ambitious role for the Croatian higher education area at both the individual and societal level that goes beyond market logic, stakeholder partnerships, increased investments in science and education, and policies addressing social inequalities and substantive local issues in higher education: structural, academic and material. The common denominator of these proposals is a vision of a higher education system in Croatia which is autonomous, which prioritizes the development of human qualities which contribute to a socially just, culturally diverse, sustainable society, which is sensitive to specificities of the Croatian society and its higher education area, in which decisions are made consensually, knowledge is framed as a public good and conditions of learning inspire both Croatian and international students.

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