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STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF CROATIAN HIGHER EDUCATION – SOME QUESTIONS, FINDINGS AND PROBLEMS*

ABSTRACT

In the context of current debates on the right to education as a fundamental human right, the importance and benefits of education for individuals and for society as a whole, on equality, fairness and social justice, etc., particular attention is directed towards analysing the issue of persons with disabilities in the context of the higher education system. The topic is also updated with the current debates on the promotion and strengthening of "inclusive education", the social dimension of the "Bologna Process", achieving the "sustainable development goals" and implementing the contemporary "human rights model" approach to disability. Based on a review and analysis of the scientific literature, as well as the legal framework and documents, and by using a hermeneutic approach, as well as analysis and comparison of available secondary data on students with disabilities in Croatia (with a focus on the University of J. J. Strossmayer in Osijek and the University of Split), the aim of this paper is to present, analyse and highlight some questions, problems and obstacles related to the position of students with disabilities in Croatian higher education. In this context, the discrepancy between the existing legal framework and its application in practise is emphasised, as well as the need to respect the human rights of persons with disabilities and ensure them equal opportunities and access to higher education in order to build a more inclusive higher education system, achieve the Bologna goals and the sustainable development goals and build a more just, equal and inclusive society.

Keywords: *students with disabilities; higher education; human rights; inclusion; Croatian society.*

"People with physical [...] disability are not only among the most deprived human beings in the world, they are also, frequently enough, the most neglected."

(Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*)

1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of students with disabilities in the Croatian higher education and science system is very complex for several reasons. On the one hand, the problem of the lack of uniform standards and specific guidelines must be pointed out, as well as the lack of responsibility and resources to take appropriate measures for people with disabilities in practise¹, which often proves to be very problematic and even discriminatory within the higher education system itself. On the other hand, there is constant talk about the need to improve the quality of the system itself. Today, the view is almost unconditionally accepted that "the most successful education systems are those that can combine equity and quality".² The idea that there is no binding or optional legal framework is often the result of prejudices about the legal culture or legal non-culture in Croatia. Although there are legal and implementing regulations in Croatia, they are often applied only partially or selectively, sometimes even casually. One example of this is the accessibility of public spaces in our universities, including the newly built ones, which should be a representative indicator not only of social sensitivity, but also of fairness and quality. One of the constant complaints about our legal system is that our legal rules and principles do not follow practise. Interestingly, this is also mentioned in the "Report on the work of the Ombudsman for Persons with Disabilities" from

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¹ This expression "emphasises that it is a person in the full sense of the word, but since the relevant part of the population must be named, the addition 'with a disability' is added. This means that the person is not 'disabled', but that a part or parts of their psyche and/or body are affected by certain deficits and do not have the functions that they have in healthy people". Marinić, M., *Jesu li osobe s invaliditetom „invalidi“? Pitanje konceptualne naravi, ali i potreba izjednačavanja mogućnosti*. Društvena istraživanja, Vol. 17, No. 1-2 (93-94), 2008, p. 201

² OECD., *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools*, OECD Publishing, 2012, p. 3, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/equity-and-quality-in-education_9789264130852-en.html, 2 February, 2025.

2023³, and one of our best-known documents on guidelines and standards for the accessibility of higher education for students with disabilities in the Republic of Croatia⁴. The second reason why it is ungrateful to deal with this subject is numerical or statistical data. They are difficult to obtain, and even when they are collected, they are difficult or impossible to compare due to the inconsistent methodology of data collection. The third reason is perhaps the least publicly discussed. Indeed, there is almost no discussion at all about the various forms of abuse of the system by its users, which in the context of this topic includes those who believe they deserve the status of a student with a disability and other health problems that may affect the progress of their studies. Understandably, there is no statistical or explanatory data on this.

The global problem of disability is enormous. Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen reports that "more than 600 million people – about a tenth of all people – live with some form of severe disability. More than 400 million of them live in underdeveloped countries"⁵. Furthermore, Sen continues, "people with disabilities in developed countries are often among the poorest of the poor in terms of income".⁶ As if one problem were not enough. And usually it isn't. In addition to the "handicap of earning", people with disabilities are also confronted with the "handicap of conversion": the difficulty of "converting income and resources into a good life precisely because of the disability".⁷ Similar data are highlighted by the World Health Organisation and the European Commission. According to the World Health Organisation in 2022, "around 1.3 billion people, i.e. around 16% of the world's population, are people with disabilities"⁸, while, according to the European Commission, "around 100 million people in the EU live with some

³ The aforementioned report states that "the normative framework for the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities is largely in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its principles, but we are lagging behind as a society in implementing the provisions and realising the rights in practise", *Izvešće o radu Pravobranitelja za osobe s invaliditetom*, 2023, p. 6, <https://posi.hr/izvjescia-o-radu/>, 11 January, 2025.

⁴ According to the document *Osiguravanje minimalnih standarda pristupačnosti visokog obrazovanja za studente s invaliditetom u Republici Hrvatskoj* "the legal prerequisites for ensuring equal opportunities, i.e. accessibility of higher education for people with disabilities in the Republic of Croatia, are in place. What is lacking are concrete measures by the responsible institutions to ensure that the equal opportunities defined in the regulations are actually implemented in practise", 2013, p. 23, <http://www.unizg.hr/studiji-i-studiranje/podrska-studentima/podrska-studentima-s-invaliditetom/dokumenti/>, 11 January, 2025.

⁵ Sen, A., *Ideja pravednosti*, Naklada Jesenski i Turk, Zagreb, 2017, p. 247.

⁶ *Loc. cit.*

⁷ *Loc. cit.*

⁸ WHO., *Global Report on Health Equity for Persons with Disabilities*, 2022, p. 3, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240063600>, 12 January, 2025.

form of disability"⁹. The educational structure and their position within the education system is best illustrated by Eurostat data from 2018, according to which "two out of five people with disabilities have only completed primary or lower secondary education"; "a larger number of people with disabilities aged 15-34 do not participate in the education, rehabilitation and employment system compared to their peers without disabilities (15% more)"; "young persons with disabilities usually leave education earlier than persons with no disabilities" etc.¹⁰ The best illustration of their position in society and on the labour market is the European Commission's data, according to which "only half of people with disabilities in the EU are employed"; a third of people with disabilities in the EU (28.4%) are at risk of poverty and social exclusion, while "half of all people with disabilities in the EU (52%) feel discriminated against"¹¹. The disadvantaged position of people with disabilities in the labour market is also highlighted in a study by the International Labour Organisation in 2024, according to which people with disabilities of working age are worse off in the labour market than other people and less likely to participate in the labour market at all, and when they do participate, they "face higher unemployment rates, are more likely to be self-employed and tend to earn less."¹²

The representation of people with disabilities in Croatia is in line with the aforementioned estimates. According to the "Report on People with Disabilities in the Republic of Croatia" of the Croatian Institute of Public Health from 2023, there are "657,791 people with disabilities in Croatia, of whom 369,242 are male (56.1%) and 288,549 are female (43.9%)", which corresponds to 17% of the total population of the Republic of Croatia¹³. In terms of age structure, 47.6% belong to the 65+ age group, 41.2% to the working age group (20 to 64 years), while 11.1% of people with disabilities belong to the group of children and young people (0 to 19 years)¹⁴. The above-mentioned report from 2023 does not include data on completed education and living conditions (due to the change in data collection methodology), but for the purposes of this paper we will highlight the data that is available and published as part of the "Report on People with Disabilities in the

⁹ Europska komisija., *Osobe s invaliditetom*, 2024, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1137&langId=hr>, 12 January, 2025.

¹⁰ Leutar Z.; Buljevac M., *Osobe s invaliditetom u društvu*. Biblioteka socijalnog rada, Zagreb, 2020, p. 118.

¹¹ *Loc. cit.*

¹² Ananian S.; Dellaferrera G., *A study on the employment and wage outcomes of people with disabilities*. International Labour Organization, 2024, p. 1, https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/WP124_web.pdf, 12 January, 2025.

¹³ Benjak T., *Izješće o osobama s invaliditetom u Republici Hrvatskoj*. Hrvatski zavod za javno zdravstvo, Zagreb, 2023, p. 5, https://www.hzjz.hr/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Bilten_-_osobe_s_invaliditetom_2023.pdf, 12 February, 2025.

¹⁴ *Loc. cit.*

Republic of Croatia" from 2019. According to the aforementioned report, around 66% of people with disabilities in the Republic of Croatia "have not completed primary school or have only primary education", while around 25% have completed secondary school; only "3% have university or higher education", and "6% of people with disabilities have completed special education".¹⁵ According to the "Report on the work of the Ombudsman for Persons with Disabilities" from 2019, data on differences in the educational structure between male and female persons with disabilities also stand out. According to the data on the education of males with disabilities, "63.5% have completed primary school, incomplete primary school or no primary school"; 28.5% have completed secondary school; 6% have a university or university degree and 2% have "completed education in special institutions and according to a special programme", while for females with disabilities an even higher percentage of persons with "completed primary school, incomplete primary school" or no education was recorded, namely 72.8%; 18.2% have completed secondary school; 7.2% have a university or higher education degree, and 1.8% have "completed education in special institutions and according to a special programme".¹⁶ The stated low educational structure of people with disabilities; inadequate or non-adapted education¹⁷; the "limited number of professions" for which training is offered and "education for unpromising professions", i.e. the mismatch of this education with the needs of the labour market, "prejudices and stereotypes about people with disabilities", "discrimination in job search", etc. also contribute to the low proportion of people with disabilities among the workforce in Croatia¹⁸. The fact that people with disabilities face particular challenges in the labour market is best illustrated by the fact that in Croatia in 2018 "the employment rate of people with disabilities was 34.3%", while the average employment rate of people with disabilities in the EU is 50.8%¹⁹. The employment rate has increased in recent years, which means that the employment gap has narrowed compared to the total population, but this gap

¹⁵ Benjak T., *Izvešće o osobama s invaliditetom u Republici Hrvatskoj*. Hrvatski zavod za javno zdravstvo, Zagreb, 2019, p. 6, https://www.hzjz.hr/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Osobe_s_invaliditetom_2019.pdf, 12 February, 2025.

¹⁶ *Izvešće o radu Pravobranitelja za osobe s invaliditetom*, 2019, p. 2, <https://posi.hr/izvjesca-o-radu/>, 11 January, 2025.

¹⁷ As an illustration, we can highlight the information about the inadequate or non-adapted education for deafblind people in Croatia, the refusal and lack of sign language interpreters and accompaniment from the pre-school system onwards during education, which undoubtedly affects their poorer results in the education system and then the more frequent completion of three-year secondary school programmes. Brajdić Vuković M.; Vuković, P., *Jednakost šansi u postizanju svakodnevne kvalitete života kod gluhostlijepih osoba*. Revija za socijalnu politiku, 27 (2), 2020, pp. 206-208.

¹⁸ Leutar Z.; Buljevac M., *op. cit.* note 10, p. 130.

¹⁹ National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia until 2030, Official Gazette, No. 13/2021 (hereinafter: NDS)

is still "one of the largest in the EU".²⁰ All this, together with the low labour and pension income and the low financial benefits received by people with disabilities, leads to an increased risk of poverty and social exclusion, which is also evident from the conclusions of various studies on poverty, poor material situation and standard of living and social exclusion of people with disabilities in today's Croatian society.²¹ The employment of persons with disabilities, their upward social mobility, the improvement of material standards and quality of life and social inclusion in general can undoubtedly be promoted through education and vocational rehabilitation as an important and indispensable, though not sufficient or the only, condition. Because even the achievement of the highest scientific degree in practise can be cancelled out by the presence of prejudices and stereotypes about people with disabilities in society and among employers, discrimination in employment, etc. In short, education of people with disabilities alone will not solve the problems associated with their employment. However, education and vocational rehabilitation are essential in this sense and should focus on "occupations that are employable and prosperous"; people with disabilities should be empowered and their acquisition of knowledge, skills and competences systematically promoted; access to all "formal and informal forms of education" must be ensured, etc.²² In this sense the need for greater inclusion of young people with disabilities in the higher education system should be emphasised. A brief overview and analysis of the relevant legal framework, professional and scientific literature and current documents analysing the above-mentioned issues in Croatian society are the subject of the next chapter of the paper.

2. SOCIETY AND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES – LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS

An overview of a broader theoretical framework explaining the importance of education for the realisation of more equitable "meritocratic" contemporary societies, often referred to in the sociological literature as "knowledge societies", i.e. societies with a high proportion of highly skilled professionals, "information societies", "post-industrial societies", etc., is beyond the scope of this

²⁰ *Loc. cit.*

²¹ Leutar, Z.; Milić Babić, M., *Pravo na rad i osobe s invaliditetom u Hrvatskoj*. Sociologija i prostor, Vol. 46, No. 2 (180), 2008, pp. 161-186.; Leutar Z.; Buljevac M., *op. cit.* note 10; Marinić, *op. cit.* note 1, pp. 199-221.; Starc N. (ed), *Siromaštvo, nezaposlenost i socijalna isključenost*, UNDP, Zagreb, 2006; Žganec N.; Lakija, M.; Milić Babić M., *Access to social rights and persons with disabilities*. Društvena istraživanja, Vol. 21, No. 1 (115), 2012, pp. 59-78.

²² Leutar Z.; Buljevac M., *op. cit.* note 10, p. 130.

paper.²³ Nevertheless, it is an indispensable theoretical framework and context to understand the implications of the themes of this paper, and when we talk about human rights, equality, fairness and social justice; about the importance and benefits of education for the individual (for their personal and professional development) and for society as a whole (education as a basis and tool for economic development, employment, social inclusion, social mobility, breaking out of the "vicious circle of poverty", etc.); about the philosophy of inclusion which "assumes that the position of people with disabilities and their discrimination is socially determined"; the fulfilment of the objectives of the social dimension of the Bologna Process (focusing on inclusion in higher education, especially for different disadvantaged social groups, in order to reduce social inequalities)²⁴; reducing existing educational inequalities, etc.²⁵

Furthermore, the inclusion of people with disabilities as an "underrepresented group in the higher education system" must be placed in a theoretical context in which, based on the above, the right to education is emphasised as a fundamental human right (while preventing the realisation of this right constitutes its violation and discrimination); "inclusive education" (inclusive and quality education that reduces the marginalisation of vulnerable groups in society within the education system); "principles of equal opportunities in education or education for all"; "adjustments to the academic environment", etc.²⁶ One of the first stumbling blocks in researching this topic is the lack of a "normative definition of a student with disabilities" in Croatia.²⁷ However, since 2013, when the aforementioned document about standards of accessibility of higher education for students with disabilities was published, the definition used is that students with disabilities are "students with visual and hearing impairments, motor disorders, chronic illnesses, specific learning difficulties (dyslexia, ADHD), mental illnesses and disorders".²⁸ According to the authors of the above-mentioned document, "there is no single and internationally recognised definition of students with disabilities", therefore the definition must be broad enough to "demonstrate the need to adapt the

²³ Pavić, Ž.; Vukelić, T., *Socijalno podrijetlo i obrazovne nejednakosti: istraživanje na primjeru osječkih studenata i srednjoškolaca*. Revija za sociologiju, Vol. 40(9), No. 1-2, 2009, pp. 53-55.

²⁴ An overview and analysis of existing public policies and the relevant international and national legal framework on the social dimension of the Bologna Process can be found in the following paper: Bošković, S.; Rinčić, I., *Visoko obrazovanje studenata s invaliditetom u Hrvatskoj*. Ljetopis socijalnog rada, 21 (3), 2014, pp. 487-492.

²⁵ Bošković, S.; Rinčić, I., *op. cit.* note 24, pp. 486-487.; Leutar Z.; Buljevac M., *op. cit.* note 10; Pavić, Ž.; Vukelić, T., *op. cit.* note 23, pp. 56-60.

²⁶ Bošković, S.; Rinčić, I., *op. cit.* note 24, p. 487.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 495.

²⁸ Farnell, T. et al., i sur., *Osiguravanje minimalnih standarda pristupačnosti visokog obrazovanja za studente s invaliditetom u Republici Hrvatskoj*, 2013, p. 8

academic environment to the needs and abilities of all the groups of students mentioned".²⁹ In this sense, a slightly more detailed definition can be found in the document entitled "Guidelines for Improving the Support System for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia" from 2016, according to which students with disabilities are "all students who, due to illness, impairment or disorder, regardless of the decision on the specified percentage of physical impairment, have permanent, occasional or temporary difficulties in performing everyday academic activities (students with visual and hearing impairments, motor disorders, chronic illnesses, mental illnesses and disorders and specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, dysgraphia and ADHD, as well as other health problems and difficulties that may affect the course of their studies)".³⁰ Finally, the Ombudsman for Persons with Disabilities in Croatia proposes the following definition as a suggestion for a formal definition of students with disabilities: "students with disabilities are students whose health condition, difficulties or impairments in combination with environmental factors may prevent their full and effective participation in the academic environment on an equal basis with other students and for whom they require reasonable adjustments and support."³¹

In addition to defining the term "students with disabilities", the second step in analysing the above-mentioned topic involves examining the relevant legal framework that regulates the right to equal access to higher education for persons with disabilities in Croatia and which also forms the basis for the actions of all higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia. It is important to emphasise that the legal framework that ensures the right of persons with disabilities to equal access to education, equal opportunities and conditions during education and accessibility of higher education for all persons, including persons with disabilities, includes a whole range of Acts, international conventions and national documents, strategies and guidelines.³² Their review and analysis goes beyond the scope of this paper, but we will highlight some of them below. Namely, the legal regulation of the right to education can be found primarily in the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia as the fundamental legal and political state

²⁹ *Loc. cit.*

³⁰ Kiš-Glavaš, L. et. al. i sur., Smjernice za unapređenje sustava potpore studentima s invaliditetom u visokom obrazovanju u Republici Hrvatskoj, 2016, p. 4-5, https://www.unizg.hr/fileadmin/rektorat/Studiji_studiranje/ Podrska/SSI/Smjernice_LKG_2016.pdf, 11 January, 2025.

³¹ *Izješće o radu Pravobranitelja za osobe s invaliditetom, op. cit.* note 3, p. 119.

³² In addition to these documents, it also contains the statutes of various universities and their components, and the study regulations of various higher education institutions.

document³³, than in the The Act on Higher Education and Scientific Activity³⁴, The anti-discrimination Act³⁵ etc.

In addition, we list below some of the most important international declarations, conventions and international and national strategies and guidelines that define the various rights of persons with disabilities and emphasise the need to protect and guarantee the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others. In doing so, we emphasise the right to equal access to higher education and the need for special consideration of the social dimension of studying for people with disabilities. In this sense, the UN „Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities“ should first be emphasised, as it is the first binding international human rights instrument for persons with disabilities, which Croatia ratified in 2007.³⁶ The Convention refers to the guarantee of a wide range of human rights for people with disabilities (civil, economic, social, political and cultural rights), and an entire article is dedicated to the right to education “without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunities”.³⁷ The Convention has influenced the development of the “human

33 Article 66 states that “education in the Republic of Croatia is open to all people under equal conditions and according to their abilities”, while Article 58 emphasises that the state pays special attention to “the protection of persons with disabilities and their inclusion in social life”. The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, Official Gazette, No. 56/90, 135/97, 8/99, 113/99, 124/00, 28/01, 41/01, 55/01, 76/10, 85/10, 05/14.

34 Article 77. rights and obligations of students states that “a student with a disability may study in accordance with the general law of the higher education institution under adapted study conditions”, while Article 78. rights under the student standard states that “a student with a certain degree of disability who is studying full-time shall exercise special rights from the students standard in accordance with the general law of the higher education institution”, and that “a student with a certain type and degree of disability shall exercise the right to transportation for students with disabilities”. The Act on Higher Education and Scientific Activity, Official Gazette, No. 119/2022.

35 The Act prohibits unequal treatment or discrimination against persons on any of the statutory grounds, including health and disability. Article 4 states that discrimination also occurs “when persons with disabilities are not enabled to use publicly available resources, to participate in public and social life, to have access to the workplace and to appropriate working conditions, in accordance with their special needs, through the adaptation of infrastructure and space, the use of equipment and in any other way that does not impose a disproportionate burden on the person for whom this is necessary”. The anti-discrimination Act, Official Gazette, No. 85/2008.

36 Croatia signed the above Convention on 30 March 2007, ratified it on 15 August 2007 and it entered into force on 3 May 2008. Babić, Z.; Leutar, Z., *Položaj osoba s invaliditetom na tržištu rada Republike Hrvatske*. Socijalna ekologija, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2010, p. 195.

37 In order to realise this right, the State must ensure “(a) that persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of their disability and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary or secondary education on the basis of their disability, (b) that persons with disabilities have access to inclusive, quality and free education on an equal basis with others, (c) reasonable accommodation of individual needs, (d) that persons with disabilities receive the necessary

rights model" as the latest approach to disability and forms the basis for the realisation of "all the rights and duties of persons with disabilities that it promotes and guarantees".³⁸ Furthermore, the European Social Charter should be mentioned³⁹, Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities⁴⁰, Council of Europe Strategy for Persons with Disabilities 2017-2023⁴¹, National Plan for Improving the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia 2019-2021⁴² etc.

As a welfare state, Croatia commits itself in the "National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia until 2030"⁴³ to strive for "further convergence towards the ideal of equal opportunities" and the inclusion of marginalised and particularly vulnerable population groups (which undoubtedly includes people with

support within the general education system to facilitate their effective education, (e) the provision of effective individualised support measures in an environment that is most conducive to academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion". Act on the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Official Gazette, No. 6/ 2007.

³⁸ Leutar Z.; Buljevac M., *op. cit.* note 10, p. 42.

³⁹ Article 15 refers to the "right of physically or mentally disabled persons to vocational training, rehabilitation and social reintegration" and the adoption of "appropriate measures for the provision of training facilities" and for employment. Act on the ratification of the European Social Charter, the Additional Protocol to the European Social Charter, the Protocol amending the European Social Charter and the Additional Protocol to the European Social Charter on a system of collective complaints, Official Gazette, No. 15/2002.

⁴⁰ With regard to education, paragraph 16 states: "In order to ensure adequate education, the Republic of Croatia will adapt its education system to the needs of persons with disabilities, insisting on adapting the existing regular education programmes and systems (pre-school, primary, secondary, higher and adult education systems) and promoting the use of new technologies, distance learning and e-education". Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Official Gazette, No. 47/2005.

⁴¹ In particular, the chapter on education and training (paragraph 62) expresses "concern that, despite improvements, people with disabilities are still at high risk of becoming unemployed and that less than 30% of them have a tertiary or equivalent qualification, compared to around 40% of people without disabilities; Member States and the Commission are therefore invited to pay particular attention to the difficulties faced by young people with disabilities and/or special educational needs in the transition from secondary or higher education to the labour market". Strategija Vijeća Europe za osobe s invaliditetom 2017.-2023., <https://eurlex.europa.eu/legalcontent/HR/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52017IP0474&from=GA>, 15 February, 2025.

⁴² It also includes measures to systematically support people with disabilities, the implementation of which will lead to better accessibility and adaptation of educational programmes to people with disabilities. Nacionalni plan za unaprjeđenje socijalne dimenzije visokog obrazovanja u Republici Hrvatskoj 2019. – 2021., <https://mzo.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/dokumenti/Obrazovanje/VisokoObrazovanje/RazvojVisokoObrazovanja.pdf>, 15 February, 2025.

⁴³ NDS, Official Gazette, No. 13/2021.

disabilities, people in institutions, people at risk of poverty, people with low socio-economic status, etc.) and the realisation of social cohesion, which is "a prerequisite for social justice, democratic security and sustainable development", as well as ensuring the "protection of human rights, democracy and the rule of law".⁴⁴ As part of the above strategy, Croatia is committed to long-term, sustainable and inclusive development, the benefits of which should be shared by all members of society, and to the realisation of priorities and goals that are in line with the "2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development"⁴⁵ (for example fulfilment of the "sustainable development goals", especially reducing the level of absolute poverty; employment and decent work; reducing inequality and ensuring and promoting social, economic and political inclusion, etc.) and the "European Green Deal"⁴⁶. Such economic and social development is sought within the framework of the following four development directions for Croatia: "sustainable economy and society" (building a "society based on the rule of law", continuous investment in knowledge and education for all members of society, "integration of all social groups into the world of work", etc.); "strengthening resilience to crises" (promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and improving the quality of life of all citizens, etc.); "green and digital transformation" (ecological, green and digital transformation of society and the economy) and "balanced regional development" (better standards and quality of life in all parts of Croatia").⁴⁷ Furthermore, with the above-mentioned strategy, Croatia has committed itself to promoting public policies, priorities and measures that prevent discrimination on any grounds, including disability, and ensure equal opportunities for the exercise of rights and the creation and promotion of "equal opportunities" for all members of society. In this sense, Croatia has also committed to implementing public policies that take into account the specificities of people with disabilities, "with particular emphasis on ensuring equal access to education, employment and all public services"⁴⁸. Ultimately, these are obligations arising from the duty to comprehensively implement the "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities", which Croatia has committed to by signing and ratifying it.

However, despite this international legal framework and decades of implementation of the Bologna Process, according to data from the European

⁴⁴ *Loc. cit.*

⁴⁵ UN., *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 2015, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf>, 8 February, 2025.

⁴⁶ European Commission., *European Green Deal: delivering on our targets*, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/attachment/869807/EGD_brochure_EN.pdf, 9 February, 2025.

⁴⁷ NDS, Official Gazette, No. 13/2021.

⁴⁸ *Loc. cit.*

Students' Union (ESU) taken from Eurostat statistics on disabilities among students, "only 15% of disabled people attain higher education"⁴⁹. Furthermore, "once enrolled in a higher education institution, it is also more difficult for such a student to graduate", more precisely "only 24% of the population aged between 30 and 34, and having a disability have graduated"⁵⁰. According to the same source, the reasons for dropping out of studies are multiple: inaccessible buildings, inaccessible teaching methods, "lack of training of academic staff and other higher education staff members"; "lack of understanding of disabilities"; "stigma from other students and staff members"; "lack of support programmes or the inaccessibility of such programmes"; "lack of accessible student activities" etc.⁵¹ Therefore, in the following chapter, some questions, problems and obstacles related to the position of students with disabilities in Croatian higher education will be analysed and highlighted.

3. ABOUT THE NUMBERS AND SOME PROBLEMS WITH REGISTERING AND OTHER ISSUES REGARDING THE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN CROATIA

According to "The Act on Higher Education and Scientific Activity" the possibility of studying for students with disabilities is prescribed "in accordance with the adapted conditions for participation in studies"⁵², however, the *obligation to make a reasonable accommodation* is not prescribed⁵³. The Ombudsman for Persons with Disabilities considers that "without reasonable accommodation and the necessary support, students with disabilities cannot be guaranteed equal study opportunities" and points out the need to harmonise the above-mentioned Act with the "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" and with "The anti-discrimination Act"⁵⁴. Namely, according to the aforementioned Acts, people with disabilities must have "equal access to tertiary education, with the obligation to make the necessary reasonable accommodations, and they must not be excluded because of their disability"⁵⁵. In this context, the Ombudsman proposes "to include in all general acts of higher education institutions": firstly, to define "who are students with disabilities and the right to reasonable accommodation in all areas";

⁴⁹ European students' union (ESU)., *Disabilities, students and Higher Education*, 2018, <https://esu-online.org/disabilities-students-higher-education/>, 6 March, 2025.

⁵⁰ *Loc. cit.*

⁵¹ *Loc. cit.*

⁵² Article 77 of The Act on Higher Education and Scientific Activity, Official Gazette, No. 119/2022.

⁵³ *Izješće o radu Pravobranitelja za osobe s invaliditetom, op. cit. note 3, p. 119.*

⁵⁴ *Loc. cit.*

⁵⁵ *Loc. cit.*

secondly, to establish "a clear method of recording students with disabilities"; and thirdly, "to establish specific rights and support within higher education (e.g. the involvement of teaching assistants and professional communication mediators, individualised support during studies, adapted transport, adapted accommodation in a student residence, personal assistance in a student residence, etc., and the method/procedure for exercising the aforementioned rights".⁵⁶ The unique way in which students with disabilities are evidenced is important for the planning and design of educational policy and the various support measures, which differ according to the type of disability.⁵⁷ Although the Office of the Ombudsman for Persons with Disabilities has been pointing out this problem and the need for systematic and standardised data collection for years, its proposals have unfortunately not been adopted and universities continue to collect data based on different collection methods. For this reason, it can be concluded that there is no clear and therefore no reliable data on the number of students with disabilities at Croatian universities. One of the reasons for this is that "the inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education" is insufficiently regulated due to the lack of a standardised definition and "in practise, this leads to a perceived inconsistency of approach" and "each institution deals in its own way with the challenges arising from the requirements for the inclusion of people with disabilities proclaimed at the principle level".⁵⁸ Although there has undoubtedly been positive progress in the last decade, the inclusion of people with disabilities in the higher education system and the handling of their challenges and problems is still in a "grey area", not only in our education and legal system, but also in society in general. Another reason is that "students do not want to declare their disability or cannot obtain a disability certificate, especially when it comes to mental health difficulties and specific learning difficulties."⁵⁹ For the purposes of this paper, we have been warned several times that the official figures are flawed in this regard because they do not capture everyone who is actually in the system. So there is also a fear of stigmatisation or labelling. The cause of this can be "a society that discriminates against those with disabilities", where "it can be active discrimination or a failure to provide the necessary resources and conditions to minimise the impact of disability".⁶⁰

One source of data on the number of students with disabilities is the data of the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth which collects the above-mentioned

⁵⁶ *Loc. cit.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁵⁸ Meić, B., *Položaj osoba s invaliditetom u sustavu visokog obrazovanja - perspektiva Ureda pravobraniteljice za osobe s invaliditetom*. Jahr, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2014, pp. 24-25.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶⁰ Haralambos, M.; Holborn, M., *Sociologija: teme i perspektive*, Golden marketing – Tehnička knjiga, Zagreb, 2002, p. 314.

data as part of an information system that records students with disabilities with at least 60% assessed physical impairment or at least degree III impairment of functional abilities in accordance with the instructions on the expert investigation methodology and entry in the Register of persons with disabilities. Namely, recorded students can exercise the following rights during their university studies in Croatia: direct enrolment in study programmes at higher education institutions outside the regular quota, provided that they exceed the points threshold; the right to a full subsidy of study costs in the first year of study and the following year if they have earned at least 30 ECTS in the previous academic year; the direct right to subsidised housing⁶¹; the right to financial support to partially cover the costs of transport from the place of residence to the place of attendance at the higher education institution and for the fulfilment of other study obligations; a state scholarship for special groups of students, including full-time students "people with disabilities"; as part of the Erasmus+ international student exchange programme, students with disabilities or other special needs are entitled to additional financial support for special needs (e.g. adapted accommodation, travel assistance, travel support, medical care, additional equipment, adapted teaching materials, an accompanying person, etc.). According to the data collected by the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth, 369 students with disabilities were enrolled in the Republic of Croatia in the academic year 2023/2024; in the academic year 2022/2023, 258 students with disabilities were accommodated in student residences, and 193 students with disabilities were entitled to financial support for transport.⁶²

Another source of data on the number of students with disabilities are the registers kept by universities, polytechnic universities and colleges, which in turn record the students who have contacted the Disability Officers to obtain support in the form of some academic adjustment (for adjustment during examinations, absence from classes, etc.) or support during their studies. Students are, of course, under

⁶¹ With regard to the right to subsidised housing, there are two groups of students with disabilities. "The student with disabilities of the first group is a student with an assessed physical impairment of at least 60% or with an impairment of functional abilities of at least the third degree according to the regulation prescribing the expert investigation methodology and who is registered in the Register of persons with disabilities", and "a student with disabilities of the second group is a student with an assessed physical impairment of up to 50% or with an impairment of functional abilities of up to the second degree according to the regulation prescribing the expert investigation methodology and registered in the Register of persons with disabilities". Students in the first group acquire the right to social housing directly (in the first year of study directly, in the following years they must obtain at least 15 ECTS points during the academic year), while students in the second group obtain 400 points, which they attach to their application. Regulation on the criteria and *manner of exercising rights* of students in regular status to subsidised housing, Official Gazette, No. 68/2023.

⁶² *Izješće o radu Pravobranitelja za osobe s invaliditetom, op. cit.* note 3, p. 122.

no obligation to seek such assistance, unless they wish to claim a right to academic adjustment or support during their studies. According to this data, a total of 1,066 students with disabilities studied at universities, polytechnic universities and colleges in Croatia in the 2023/2024 academic year.⁶³ (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of students with disabilities in Croatia according to data from universities, polytechnic universities and colleges in the academic years 2022/2023 and 2023/2024

Universities/ polytechnic universities and colleges	2022/2023			2023/2024		
	Total number of students	Total number of students with disabilities	Share in total number	Total number of students	Total number of students with disabilities	Share in total number
Universities in total	135.099	978	0,72%	135.675	1.059	0,78%
Polytechnic universities and colleges in total	24.670	88	0.36%	13.319	93	0,69%
In total	159.769	1.066	0,67%	148.994	1.152	0,77%

Source: *Izvjешće o radu Pravobranitelja za osobe s invaliditetom*, 2023, p. 123.

The inconsistency of data collection on the number of students with disabilities is also reflected in the way in which data is collected by different universities. For this reason, the authors of the paper requested data on the number of students with disabilities from the Office for Students with Disabilities at the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University in Osijek and the University of Split. The collected data can confirm the above-mentioned inconsistency in data collection (Table 2).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

Table 2. Number of registered students with disabilities at the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek and the University of Split

Academic year	Number of registered students with disabilities at the University of Osijek		Number of registered students with disabilities at the University of Split	
	In total	Active	In total	Active
2010/2011	26	26	-	-
2011/2012	42	34	-	-
2012/2013	46	37	-	-
2013/2014	57	39	-	-
2014/2015	68	48	-	-
2015/2016	82	58	36	-
2016/2017	92	61	38	-
2017/2018	96	59	41	-
2018/2019	104	58	43	-
2019/2020	115	64	43	-
2020/2021	130	65	53	-
2021/2022	136	62	57	-
2022/2023	156	75	58	-
2023/2024	179	90	61	-
2024/2025	201*	102	98**	-

*of that number, 156 students have physical disabilities of 60% or more;

** of that number, 54 students have physical disabilities of 60% or more;

Source: prepared by the authors based on data from the Office for Students with Disabilities of the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University in Osijek and the Office for Students with Disabilities of the University of Split

In contrast to the data collected by the Office for Students with Disabilities of the University of Split, which refers only to the total number of students at all university components since the academic year 2015/2016 (when the Office for Students with Disabilities of the University of Split started its work),⁶⁴ the data received from the Office for Students with Disabilities at Josip Juraj Strossmayer University in Osijek includes this information, but also data on activities, i.e. progress of enrolled students, graduations, etc. The Office for Students with

⁶⁴ The Office for Students with Disabilities at the University of Split started its work on 1 May 2016 and consists of one person, namely the Head of the Office for Students with Disabilities. We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Head of the Office, Ivan Bogdanović, for his sincere help and provision of data for the needs of this paper. Studenti s invaliditetom Sveučilišta u Splitu, <https://arhiva.unist.hr/studiranje-u-splitu/ured-zastudente-s-posebnim-potrebama>, 10 January, 2025.

Disabilities at the J. J. Strossmayer University of Osijek was established in 2008.⁶⁵ Since then, data on the number of enrolled students with some form of disability has been monitored, and since the 2010/2011 academic year, a regular annual system of monitoring the number of students has been developed through the "Record List of the Office for Students with Disabilities". Each university component at the University of Osijek maintains its own table with data on students with disabilities. In the 2013/2014 academic year, the monitoring system was improved to remedy some of the shortcomings identified. In addition to the record sheets, all participants fill in a table with a standardised form that shows the progress of each student. Students are never removed from the spreadsheet, only data on status changes (student's year, inaction, graduation, etc.) are added. The Office for Students with Disabilities continues to maintain a standardised "Register for Students with Disabilities" (Table 3), which can also serve as an example of how data can be collected and consolidated in the Register for Students with Disabilities at the University of Split.

⁶⁵ The Office for Students with Disabilities at the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek was established on 26 May 2008. The Office employs two people and is managed and coordinated by the Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs and Students and the Head of the Office. We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Head of the Office, Damir Španić, PhD, for his sincere help and provision of data for the needs of this paper. Studenti s invaliditetom Sveučilišta Josip Juraj Strossmayer u Osijeku, <https://unios.hr/studenti/studenti-s-invaliditetom/podrska/>, 10 January, 2025.

Table 3. Register of students with disabilities at the University of Osijek (2010 – 2024)

Academic year	Number of registered students with disabilities		Graduated	Withdraw	Transition
	In total	Active			
2010/2011	26	26			
2011/2012	42	34			
2012/2013	46	37	8	1	0
2013/2014	57	39	13	4	1
2014/2015	68	48	14	5	1
2015/2016	82	58	16	7	1
2016/2017	92	61	17	13	1
2017/2018	96	59	22	14	1
2018/2019	104	58	29	16	1
2019/2020	115	64	31	19	1
2020/2021	130	65	39	23	4***
2021/2022	136	62	46	25	4
2022/2023	156	75	52	26	4
2023/2024	179	90	58	28	4
2024/2025	201*	102	63**	30	4

*of that number, 156 students have physical disabilities of 60% or more;

** one student has enrolled in a specialist study and is recorded as active;

*** 2020/2021 the University of Slavonski Brod was founded;

Source: Office for Students with Disabilities of the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University in Osijek

The authors of the paper requested data on the number of enrolled students with disabilities by type of disability and impairment at the J. J. Strossmayer University in Osijek and the University of Split from the above-mentioned Offices for Students with Disabilities. The data collected also confirms the aforementioned inconsistency in data collection, not only in terms of the number of registered students with disabilities, but also in the recording of different types of disabilities and impairments. The data collected from the J. J. Strossmayer University in Osijek (Table 4) and the University of Split (Table 5) are presented below.

Table 4. Number of registered students with disabilities by type of difficulties and impairments at Josip Juraj Strossmayer University in Osijek in the academic year 2024/2025

Types of difficulties and impairments	Number of registered students with disabilities
Motor difficulties	63
Visual impairment	13
Hearing impairment	6
Chronic diseases	17
Impairment of language-speech-voice communication	1
Internal organs impairment	13
Specific learning disabilities	8
Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder	0
Autism spectrum disorders	1
Mental health difficulties	1
Multiple impairments	34
Other	1
Unknown data	43
In total	201

Source: prepared by the authors based on data from the Office for Students with Disabilities of the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University in Osijek received during January 2025

Table 5. Number of registered students with disabilities by type and degree of difficulties and impairments at the University of Split in the academic year 2024/2025

Types and degree of difficulties and impairments	Number of registered students with disabilities
100% physical disability*	22
80% physical disability*	13
60% physical disability*	12
More than 60% physical disability*	1
Less than 60% physical disability*	4
At least 60% physical disability*	2
III degree of disability - impairment of functional abilities**	4
IV degree of disability - impairment of functional abilities**	2
Cronic and long-term illnesses	13
Specific learning difficulties (eg. dysgraphia, dyslexia, etc.)	10
Mental difficulties, disorders and illnesses	11
Unknown data	2
In total	98

* the degree of impairment based on the opinion of the competent authority for expert investigation and entry in the Register of Persons with Disabilities;

** according to Regulation on the expert investigation methodology, Official Gazette, No. 96/2023

Source: prepared by the authors based on data from the Office for Students with Disabilities of the University of Split received during February 2025

From the above tables it can be concluded that the University of Osijek keeps records according to the type of difficulties and impairments, while the University of Split keeps records according to the degree of impairment on the basis of an opinion of the competent authority for expert investigation and entry in the Register of Persons with Disabilities, and according to Regulation on the expert investigation methodology. It should also be noted that while the University of Osijek has a larger number of students with disabilities overall, mental health difficulties are the least represented (only one student), which may indicate the stigma that still exists in relation to the aforementioned difficulties as well as specific learning difficulties⁶⁶, while the data of up to 43 students are unknown. Based on the University of Split records, the data are unknown for only two students, but the records do not allow conclusions to be drawn about the type of the impairments and difficulties. In short, both recording methods have advantages and disadvantages, but for this reason, and in order to collect data in a uniform

⁶⁶ Meić, *op. cit.* note 58, p. 27.

manner, the Office of the Ombudsman for Persons with Disabilities has for several years recommended the use of a "comprehensive recording questionnaire" – "a form developed by the Coordination of the Ombudsman for Persons with Disabilities for the field of higher education"⁶⁷. The aforementioned form contains "personal data, data on the disability, the type of the disability, data on necessary adaptations and aids during education", etc.⁶⁸ The proposed form is still not applied in all higher education institutions, which is also evident from the data collected by the authors of the paper. In this regard, we can only agree with the Ombudsman's assessment that the figures we cite will continue to be "only a rough indicator and a reflection of the different rights that students with disabilities have obtained at different universities in Croatia" as long as the method of collecting data on the number of students with disabilities is not standardised and "the definition of a student with disabilities itself" is not accepted and unified.⁶⁹

The figures collected by the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth and the figures collected by universities based on the records of all their university components can be supplemented by data collected as part of the EUROSTUDENT VII survey (the fourth EUROSTUDENT survey in which Croatia is participating) on a convenient sample of the student population in Croatia in the 2018/2019 academic year.⁷⁰ Namely, the EUROSTUDENT surveys mentioned above are conducted with the aim of creating a clearer picture of the "social profile of students in Croatian higher education institutions", and one of the ongoing objectives of these surveys is to examine "the extent to which higher education is accessible to people with physical or mental disabilities".⁷¹ The above need to be empirically analysed in order to plan and "improve support for people with disabilities" so that "they are not excluded from the educational process due to barriers that are not visible to people without disabilities".⁷² In the 2018/2019 study mentioned above, a total of 1,840 completed questionnaires were analysed, of which 71.2% of students stated that they had no difficulties; 6.5% did not answer the question, while 21.4% of students stated one or more difficulties.⁷³ The data from the EUROSTUDENT VI study, which was conducted in the 2015/2016 academic year on a convenient sample of 5,074 students in Croatia, is also used

⁶⁷ *Izvjeshće o radu Pravobranitelja za osobe s invaliditetom*, op. cit. note 3, p. 122.

⁶⁸ *Loc. cit.*

⁶⁹ *Loc. cit.*

⁷⁰ Rimac, I., *Istraživačko izvješće projekta EUROSTUDENT VII*. Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja Republike Hrvatske, Zagreb, 2021, p. 9.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁷² *Loc. cit.*

⁷³ *Loc. cit.*

for comparison.⁷⁴ In that survey, a total of 11.8% of students stated that they had "some form of difficulty that functionally interferes with their life or studies" (in the 2011 survey, 15% of students stated that they had difficulties, while in 2014, 14% of students stated that they had difficulties).⁷⁵ In the 2015/2016 academic year, most students (5.8%) reported having "some other long-term physical and/or health problems", which was to be expected as the list of problems (which students could select in their responses) refers to only five problems that may affect the progress of their studies. The students then stated that they had the following problems: visual and hearing impairments (4.7%), chronic illnesses (3.7%), mental difficulties (2.0%), learning disabilities (e.g. dyslexia, dysgraphia, ADHD) and difficulties with moving (0.4%).⁷⁶ The responses of the students who reported difficulties in the EUROSTUDENT VII survey for the 2018/2019 academic year are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Students with difficulties by type of difficulty and assessment of the impact of the difficulty on studying (2018/2019)

Type of difficulty	Number of students having difficulty (%)	Assessment of the difficulty as "somewhat disruptive" (%)	Assessment of the difficulty as "significantly disruptive" (%)
Cronic physical illness	5	2,5	0,4
Mental difficulties	3,6	1,7	1,6
Difficulty with moving	1,0	0,4	0,1
Vision or hearing impairment	5,4	1,4	0,4
Learning disabilities (e.g. dyslexia)	1,5	1,0	0,1
Any other long-term health problems, functional limitations or impairments	8,4	3,7	3,6

Source: Rimac, I., *Istraživačko izvješće projekta EUROSTUDENT VII*. Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja Republike Hrvatske, Zagreb, 2021, pp. 38-39.

Table 6 shows that in the 2018/2019 academic year, most students (8.4%) reported the presence of "another health problem, functional limitation or impairment", which is to be expected for the reasons mentioned above. For this response, most students indicated that it was a "somewhat disruptive" difficulty (3.7%) and a

⁷⁴ Rimac, I.; Bovan, K.; Ogresta J., *Socijalni i ekonomski uvjeti studentskog života u Hrvatskoj. Nacionalo izvješće istraživanja EUROSTUDENT VI. za Hrvatsku*. Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja, Zagreb, 2019, p. 13

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

"significantly disruptive" difficulty for their studies (3.6%). However, of the other difficulties mentioned in the 2018/2019 academic year, visual or hearing impairments (5.4%) and mental difficulties (3.6%) were the most common. Still, when assessing the impact of individual difficulties on learning, the order changes and most students in the 2018/2019 academic year name chronic physical illnesses (2.5%) and mental difficulties (1.7%) as "somewhat disruptive" difficulties during their studies, while they name mental difficulties (1.6) as "significantly disruptive" difficulties during their studies, followed by chronic physical illnesses (0.4%) and visual or hearing impairments (0.4%). Overall, the results of the 2018/2019 survey show that, alongside long-term health problems, functional limitations or impairments, mental difficulties are cited as the second most important obstacle to studying. In addition, 2.8% of students estimate that their difficulties seriously interferes with their studies, while 8.8% of students believe that the difficulties they face interfere with their studies less, but still interfere their studies.⁷⁷ In this sense, the data collected in 2018/2019 differs from the data collected in 2015/2016. In fact, according to the 2015/2016 data, only 0.8% of the total student population believe that difficulties seriously limit them in everyday activities and studies, while 1.3% believe that they limit them somewhat less, but still considerably (1.4% in everyday activities and 1.3% in studies).⁷⁸ From this data, it can be concluded that in the 2015/2016 academic year, approximately 2.1% of students needed support from the higher education institution or university they were studying at (although we cannot say for certain that they applied for help or support), while in the 2018/2019 academic year this figure is significantly higher, i.e. it would relate to up to 11.6% of students. The EUROSTUDENT surveys mentioned above also collect data on the assessment of "support from the higher education institution in overcoming difficulties", and the surveys from the 2018/2019 academic year show that students are "mostly very critical" of the support provided by the higher education institution.⁷⁹ In the 2018/2019 academic year, as many as 19.7% of students considered the aid to be "completely inadequate" and 23.4% "inadequate", while only 6.1% of students considered the aid to be "completely adequate" and 10.9% "adequate".⁸⁰ In addition, it is interesting to highlight the fact that students with difficulties in the 2015/2016 academic year expressed lower satisfaction with the "quality of teaching and the organisation of studies and the lecture plan" than other students (who expressed medium satisfaction with these aspects of studies overall), while they are just as satisfied with the "spatial equipment as other students"⁸¹. From this data, it can be concluded that significant progress has been made in terms of spatial accessibility,

⁷⁷ Rimac., *op. cit.* note 70, p. 38.

⁷⁸ Rimac, I.; Bovan, K.; Ogresta J., *op. cit.* note 74, p. 35.

⁷⁹ Rimac., *op. cit.* note 70, p. 39.

⁸⁰ *Loc. cit.*

⁸¹ Rimac, I.; Bovan, K.; Ogresta J., *op. cit.* note 74, pp. 82-83.

but that other forms of support and adaptation are also needed for students with disabilities and difficulties.

In short, the research results presented should serve as a guidelines for universities in the Republic of Croatia to implement, organise and provide better help, support and counselling for students in terms of health and learning, especially for mental health education and the creation of better psychological support for students.⁸² Both universities highlighted so far in this paper (University of Split and J. J. Strossmayer University in Osijek) have established a "Psychological Counselling Centre" for students for this reason.⁸³ However, what the data from the last two EUROSTUDENT surveys for Croatia show is an increase in the proportion of students with difficulties who report having mental difficulties, i.e. in the 2015/2016 survey this proportion was 2.0%, while in the 2019/2019 survey it was 3.6%. It is therefore necessary to continuously invest in education and counselling and provide support and assistance to students, precisely to maintain their mental health, but also because of the existence of mental difficulties, as they seem to be the area most burdened by stigma and still the least reported, and they can significantly affect academic success and quality of life during studies.

Furthermore, it is necessary to "ensure greater psychosocial support for students with disabilities in higher education"⁸⁴. These are the conclusions of a quantitative study conducted in 2013 on a convenient sample of students with disabilities in Croatia.⁸⁵ Study adjustment was investigated as a "significant predictor of academic performance and study effectiveness" and as a complex process involving "academic, social and emotional adjustment".⁸⁶ According to the conclusions of the above study, students with disabilities are similar to students

⁸² This refers to "mental health as part of general health", not just the "absence of mental illness". For more information on student mental health and the psychosocial needs of students, see the following document: Jokić-Begić, N. (ed.), *Studenti s invaliditetom 8. Psihosocijalne potrebe studenata*, 2012, https://www.unizg.hr/fileadmin/rektorat/Studiji_studiranje/Podrska/SSI/sihosocijalne_potrebe.pdf, 5 March, 2025.

⁸³ The University of Split has established a "Psychological Counselling Centre", which "offers students help and support in solving personal difficulties, increasing the efficiency of their studies and improving their quality of life", <https://arhiva.unist.hr/studentska-savjetovalista/psiholosko-savjetovaliste>, 13 February, 2025. Students at J. J. Strossmayer University in Osijek have access to a "Psychological Counselling Centre", where "students can receive psychological help and support in dealing with various problems, from problems related to their studies to personal problems", <https://www.unios.hr/kvaliteta/psiholosko-savjetovaliste-svecucilista-josipa-jurja-strossmayera-u-osijeku/>, 13 February, 2025.

⁸⁴ Bošković, S.; Ilić-Stošević, D.; Skočić-Mihić, S., *Prilagodba na studij s obzirom na neka obilježja studenata s invaliditetom*. Revija za socijalnu politiku, 24 (1), 2017, p. 64.

⁸⁵ The study involved 64 students with disabilities, with an average age of 25, 57 of whom were full-time students, *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

without disabilities in terms of academic and social adjustment to their studies, but they show a lower level of emotional adjustment to their studies.⁸⁷ Therefore, the need for "greater psychosocial support for students with disabilities" in higher education is emphasised, as well as the importance of strengthening their "emotional capacities" due to the various "demands and limitations associated with disabilities".⁸⁸

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can reiterate the need for a legal or normative definition of the term "students with disabilities" in Croatia and for standardised data collection on students with disabilities, as well as data collection on the types of academic adjustments that students need during their studies. All of this is necessary not only for analysing trends, but also for successfully planning the support that students with disabilities need. Namely, in order to be able to deal with people with disabilities in the Croatian higher education system in a quality manner, it is necessary to keep more systematic records, which are often the only indicators of the problems that need to be solved. Furthermore, students with disabilities in the Croatian higher education system still face many difficulties that can be eliminated by the system itself: from physical to professional difficulties, of which the one related to the education of university teachers themselves for the special needs of students with disabilities seems particularly important. Indeed, university teachers need to be trained and educated so that they themselves can successfully make various academic adjustments without compromising learning outcomes or lowering the criteria for student expectations. With the exception of teachers who have attended studies for obtaining the title of professor, the other university teachers have not acquired or had to acquire basic teaching skills during their studies, apart from relatively short training courses on didactics and learning and teaching methods during working at the Faculty or other higher education institution. Such education does not include informing or training university teachers about academic adjustments and the method of working individually with students with disabilities, nor about their abilities. In this sense, this type of teacher training should be encouraged and, of course, everything should be done so that reasonable adjustments can be implemented uniformly during the study programme, regardless of which teacher leads a course. Namely, the Office of the Ombudsman for Persons with Disabilities points to findings "that certain professors at higher education institutions regard elements of the provisions for students with disabilities as legally unfounded or even as favouritism" towards

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

students.⁸⁹ Furthermore, in order to implement some academic adjustment into practise, a solution for adjustment is sought in accordance with the university's statutes and statutes of its components or its various study regulations, which prescribe some forms and methods of adjustment for students with disabilities. Although no regulation can prescribe every situation and every adjustment, a solution in this sense would be the mandatory training of university teachers and the drafting of more detailed general laws and regulations for higher education institutions that would uniformly prescribe "specific rights and support in higher education" and "specific forms and methods of adjustment" for students with disabilities at the national level⁹⁰. Although the legal basis has been presented in the previous sections, students with disabilities are still in an unequal position in the higher education system, as the implementation of the regulations and the practise of the various academic adjustments depends on the university (or its components); moreover, the claim of an unequal position is supported by the aforementioned data on more frequent study interruptions, i.e. longer study duration, which is not always and exclusively a consequence of the students themselves, but also of an unadjusted system. Finally, future analysis should include all people with disabilities in the higher education system, including not only students but also academic, teaching and administrative/technical staff with disabilities. Indeed, while data is collected on students (inconsistent but nonetheless approximate data), we know little or almost nothing about other people with disabilities in the higher education system. In fact, we all "assume something" about their work and difficulties. For this reason, the Ombudsman's Office has repeatedly proposed in recent years that, in addition to the standardised collection of data on students with disabilities, the same data should also be collected on all employees in the higher education sector, but unfortunately the proposals are not adopted.⁹¹ In conclusion, we can therefore once again point out the discrepancy between the existing legal framework and its application in practise, i.e. the implementation of the "Convention on Persons with Disabilities" in the Croatian higher education system, as well as the need to respect the human rights of persons with disabilities and ensure them equal opportunities and access to higher education in order to build a more inclusive higher education system, achieve the Bologna goals and the sustainable development goals and build a more just, equal and inclusive society.

In short, the issue of students with disabilities in our higher education system is extremely complex and difficult, as is achieving the stated goals. While much progress has undoubtedly been made, there is still room for improvement towards

⁸⁹ Meić, *op. cit.* note 58, p. 24.

⁹⁰ *Izješće o radu Pravobranitelja za osobe s invaliditetom*, *op. cit.* note 3, p. 119.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

achieving the stated goals. Some of the proposals are also listed in this paper. In addition, neither as a society nor as employees in the higher education system do we often realise that a person with a disability is much more than their disability, that they are valuable and have their own dignity and that they can and should fulfil all their potential. The higher education system must be much more than just the fulfilment of declarations, strategies, quotas or all that can be summarised under the word - form - which is briefly presented in the paper. Students with disabilities do not need our pity or sympathy. They want us to recognize them as equal members of our society who can realize their full potential and they will know how to do so unless if we do not prevent them from doing so. By recognising and valuing their potential, we "fulfil" Aristotle's famous statement from the beginning of his "Metaphysics": "All people naturally strive for knowledge". This of course also applies to people with disabilities.

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