

Higher education in Croatia

by Igor Radeka

The great changes that spread over Europe at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s brought about the collapse of the socialist social order and the disappearance of many multinational states in the socialist bloc.

Within this context, during the process of the falling apart of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia amidst the turmoil of war that started in 1991, the Republic of Croatia gained independence. Croatia is a relatively small, ecologically preserved and, in the opinion of many people, a very beautiful Middle European and Mediterranean country whose capital is the city of Zagreb. The Constitution drawn up in 1990 designates it as a parliamentary democracy. It encompasses a surface of 56 500 km² from the Danube river to the Adriatic sea (with 33 200 km² of water surfaces and thousands of islands). According to the last census in 2001 the population of Croatia is 4.44 million people. The gross domestic product (GDP) is 31 billion euro, that is 7000 euro per inhabitant with a large foreign debt of 82.5% of the GDP. Its foreign debt is 25.5 billion euro, while the percentage of unemployed is 12.7% (data from 2005). During the last couple of years the average economic growth rate ranges from 3.8% to 5.6%. The primary sector (agriculture, forestry and fishing) employs 7.9%, the secondary sector (mining, industry, construction, manufacturing trades) 30.4%, while the tertiary sector (administration, defence, education, health care, banking, transportation, retailing and others) employs 61.5% of its citizens.

Education

Of the GDP, 4.62% goes to education and science of which 1.42% goes to higher education and science while 3.2%, goes to elementary and secondary schooling. According to these figures Croatia is lag-

ging behind the countries of the European Union. The average total allocation for education and science within the EU is 6.18%, of which 2.03% of the GDP goes to science and higher education while 4.15% is marked for elementary and secondary schooling. The educational structure of the citizens is also below the level of the member states of the EU, which Croatia desires to join: only 7.82% of the citizens have a university education (including 11 000 individuals with a Master's and 5500 with a PhD), 4.08% have finished some kind of two-year higher education, while 47% have a secondary school diploma. Regarding this last figure, three-fifths of those with such a diploma have completed three-year vocational schools, which does not allow them to continue their studies at institutions of higher learning. The remaining 40% of the populace either only attended elementary school or did not go to school at all. Lately enormous efforts have been made to bring Croatian society in line with the standards of the EU. Although problems have been encountered, there are evident advances. This has been particularly evident with higher education.

Binary system

The passing of a new law in 1993 initiated a process of structural changes within higher education in Croatia that is still going on – in 2004 the existing law was amended twice, and further changes are currently in the offing. Today Croatia has a binary system of higher education with 109 higher education institutions, some of which are organised within the framework of the universities while others are organised as some kind of polytechnic. All of the six universities are public research/teaching institutions whose constituent parts are 72 faculties with seven art academies and higher schools. The polytechnics exist within the framework of 10 public schools of professional high-

er education and four public higher schools. During the 15 years since Croatia gained its independence, 14 private higher schools and two private polytechnics have been opened.

The binary system of higher education was introduced in 1993 when the tradition of the unitary system was abandoned. There is still an imbalance between the universities and the small number of polytechnics (which are cheaper and more attuned to the needs of the market) and this has become even more complex with the subsequent integration of some polytechnics into the university system. The completion of the process of separating the university and the polytechnics with an accompanying strengthening of the polycentric development of polytechnics has been planned to last till 2010.

Of the university institutions that evince a historical continuity, the oldest is the University of Zagreb that was founded in 1874. The University of Split, the University of Rijeka and the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University in Osijek, founded during the 1970s, come next in order. The youngest universities were founded in 2003 in Zadar and Dubrovnik. The University of Zadar has inherited the legacy of the oldest university to have been founded on Croatian soil – The General School of the Dominican Order or Universitas Jadertina which was active from 1396 to 1807. The University of Zagreb is the largest, with more than 30 faculties and three art academies. It has 60 000 students, 3500 professors and teaching assistants and 2000 employed administrative staff. The universities in Split, Rijeka and Osijek combined have fewer faculties than the University of Zagreb. The University of Zadar is based on departments, while the most recently established university in Dubrovnik consists of 12 study programmes. In addition to these institutions there are 25 public scientific institutes which work outside the universities, of which 20 are in Zagreb, two in Rijeka and Split and one in Osijek. They employ 2300 scientists. These institutes do not organise or implement university or polytechnic studies, although a number of scientists from the institutes, in agreement with



Celebrating the end of the school year in Dubrovnik

higher education institutions, participate in their teaching.

Problems

At present 140 000 students are studying in Croatia, of which approximately 105 000 at universities, 23 000 at polytechnics and 12 000 at private and public higher schools. In proportion to its population, the number of students in Croatia is among the lowest in Europe. When one takes into account that only 33% of students complete the study they enrolled in, while only 8% graduate in the statutory time period, it is evident that the system of higher education in Croatia is burdened with great problems. In this regard, the only encouraging sign is that the number of students grew by 35% during the 1990s.

Bologna

At the beginning of the third millennium Croatia commenced some systematic changes of its higher education in accordance with the Bologna process. This inaugurated the process of structural reform of the national system as part of the framework for joining the European space of higher education. The official entrance into this process was initiated in 2001 in Prague at the conference of ministers for higher education. The four basic goals are the functional integration of the university, the advancement of polytechnics (schools of professional higher education), the implementation of the Bologna process and the assurance of quality and excellence of teaching in

higher education combined with scientific research.

Reforms

After the formation of key institutions needed for the reform and for monitoring the quality of the whole system, the evaluation of undergraduate and graduate studies programmes adapted to new criteria was undertaken in 2005. This amounted to the implementation of the Bologna process which introduced the first two cycles. Most study programmes adapted the model 3+2, while a smaller number of study programmes followed the model 4+1. Only some higher education institutions came up with so-called integrated programmes – for example, medicine (6+0), law and teacher programmes (5+0). At the end of 2005 the evaluation of postgraduate specialist and doctorate studies commenced and they ought to have been completed before the beginning of the 2006/07 academic year. In the academic year 2005/06 the first year of studying according to the new approved curricula and programmes was completed. What came to the fore as a very large problem during this period was the domination of faculties, isolated from one another, and forming constituent parts of largely unintegrated universities that did not have a major impact on key scholarly and teaching processes within the faculties. This hinders thorough implementation of the Bologna process. Likewise, problems with teaching space and especially the dispersion of the constituent parts of all six universities also

hinder further progress. Huge financial difficulties have been noted. The low numbers of teaching staff mean they have been burdened with additional hours to ensure individual work with students. Problems have also arisen with the still incomplete and insufficiently elaborated system of quality control as well as with insufficient mobility. These problems have been recognised and some of them will soon be eliminated. Thus 2007 has been designated as the time limit for introduction of the functional integration of the university and the lump-sum model of doing finance. The construction of new university campuses, which has begun at some universities while elsewhere preparations have been made, will create the preconditions for a more complex drawing-up of study programmes in accordance with the interests and the needs of the students. In this manner they can be transformed from today's studies, which are in large part restricted to the level of individual faculties, into university studies which would enable students to participate in the learning process at a number of faculties, which is the core sense of the Bologna process. The employment of new, predominantly young, teaching staff has been expedited because there are no university-level teachers on the job market.

Future goals

With all of its problems and with the bal- last of the past, Croatia, in this phase of transition, has courageously stepped into the new millennium by undertaking a systematic reform of its higher education. On this path the high quality implementation of the Bologna process together with the elimination of structural problems will enable the accomplishment of two complementary goals: the raising of the quality of the national system of higher education and its harmonisation with the European space of higher education. ■

Igor Radeka is Assistant Professor in the Department of Education at the University of Zadar, www.unizd.hr

*Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, public.mzos.hr/default.asp?jezik=2
The National Foundation for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development of the Republic of Croatia, www.nzz.hr/en/index.php
Croatian National Tourist Board, www.croatia.hr*