



CROATIA

**DESTINATION UNCERTAIN?
TRENDS, PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES
IN STRENGTHENING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION
FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION AND SOCIAL COHESION**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The focus of this report is three-year 'industrial and craft' vocational education and training (VET) and the ways in which its structure and processes alleviate or enhance the risk of social exclusion. Three-year VET is the least selective track of upper secondary education in Croatia (there are no academic requirements for entry). It includes substantially more practical training than four-year technical vocational programmes, features an applied vocational curriculum including a very limited general subject pool and offers no direct access to matriculation or tertiary education. Since the mid-2000s, the majority of three-year craft courses have been run as apprenticeship arrangements and include significant firm-based training. Due to ongoing demographic changes, a quota system and the low popularity of three-year vocational courses, the share of secondary education graduates in this track has declined from 40% to 26% of a generation over a 13-year period (1998–2011).

The research team used a participatory research approach that required the formation of national and local research advisory boards. These boards comprised the relevant stakeholders, which were consulted about the implementation of the research process. The research process consisted of an analysis of relevant policy documents and semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in pertinent national agencies and organisations. In-depth data (qualitative and quantitative) was also collected at three locations in Croatia: Čakovec, Karlovac and Rijeka. At these locations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders in local agencies and organisations. Interviews were also conducted with teachers at a selected case study vocational school. Students and students' parents, together with local employers, were also involved in the research through their participation in focus groups. In addition, a questionnaire was administered to students and teachers. The findings presented in this report are based on these sources.

The institutional and legal framework governing upper secondary education changed substantially in the late 2000s. New laws, institutions and procedures were introduced. However, these did not address broad social inclusion issues, in particular when dealing with vocational education. Indeed, inclusion in the policy arena is most often framed very narrowly in terms of students with disabilities or Roma. Documents framing social inclusion issues (Joint Memorandum on Social Inclusion, 2007; Joint Memorandum on the Employment Policy Priorities, 2008) provide some focus on dropout prevention and matching educational provision with labour market needs (modernising curricula). However, it does so at a rather abstract level and with few direct implications for three-year VET. Social cohesion is not recognised as a term in the policy arena.

While several reforms have been undertaken with international standards and processes in mind (e.g. Bruges Communiqué in 2010), the implemented normative changes do not seem to be fully functioning in practice. In addition, there is much compartmentalisation and little substantial coordination between different key policy stakeholders. Three-year VET is central only to the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts. Other stakeholders have only a token involvement as four-year technical VET has more visibility for them.

Our examination of social inclusion focuses on access to three-year vocational education, school processes, including apprenticeship practices, transition to the labour market or further education and cooperation with the local community. In terms of access, we find that three-year schools are not very popular, and due to abundant placements there are few barriers to entry. However, several constraints, including health, gender, opportunity for training placement and course popularity, leave some students (in particular those with poor grades) with virtually no choice to make. With respect to mobility, some formal channels exist although they are rarely well elaborated in operational terms. Both vertical and horizontal mobility are seldom observed in practice, particularly in the direction of more prestigious tracks or courses. Strong institutional efforts are made to prevent dropout, such as changing to less demanding tracks or courses. However, once students leave education, they become invisible to the education system (no one's responsibility). Students in general fear the uncertainty of their future prospects and feel insufficiently informed about labour market and further educational opportunities.

The patterns observed at local level in school communities are rather similar, although there seems to be more marginalisation where a smaller share of the population attends the three-year vocational track. Schools are struggling (against each other and more prestigious tracks) to attract students in the current demographic context. Concerns have been raised over outreach, as well as the e-enrolment system due to be introduced in the 2013/14 school year. There are fears that it will prevent personal contact, noted in schools as particularly valuable for less privileged students.

Working with three-year VET students has been described as challenging. The majority of students come from rural areas and low-income families where the parents have a low level of education. Many have a history of family problems, behavioural issues, low self-esteem and health or learning difficulties. This majority is set apart from the smaller 'elite' group of students who wish to continue their family business. While violence and bullying are not overtly present in the schools which participated in this project, lack of motivation is perceived as a key student-related issue.

Teachers report that they need considerable support and training to educate this student population effectively. In examining school processes we find that there is a lack of financial resources, aggravated by the economic crisis. This affects school equipment, the professional training of teachers and students' participation in competitions and other events.

While the school climate within the participating school communities seemed positive, three-year VET students carry a certain stigma in the wider community, where they are considered to be less competent or troublesome. This was observed across localities, although there seems to be more marginalisation where a smaller share of the population attends the three-year vocational track. Three-year VET students are less likely than their counterparts in four-year schools to participate in local community activities. School-initiated community engagement is present, but is mostly limited to high achievers. Formal school cooperation with civic organisations is limited to participation in donor-driven projects.

Firm-based training is commonplace. Students generally find it satisfying and good for workplace integration. However, employers often do not remunerate students and there are anecdotes of exploitation. The coordination between schools and employers with respect to apprenticeship practices is mostly formal. Employers' input into the curriculum is sporadic. At the same time, employers receive little in terms of support for training provision and have restrained capacities in times of economic crisis.

In terms of continuing education or entering the labour market, three-year VET students are a particularly at-risk group. Continuing education is made difficult because of a high number of additional exams that students need to pass in order to take the state matriculation exam. Barriers to entering the labour market include the economic crisis and changes to the labour market, age restraints and lack of guidance on labour market opportunities.

Based on research findings, a set of interventions was developed. The aim of these interventions is to enhance the inclusion of three-year VET students in each of the three school communities covered by this report. As the similarities outweigh the differences between the schools, many recommendations apply to all three

locations. We have suggested: (i) striving to make the school environments more equitable in terms of full participation in school life for all students; (ii) counselling and informing students about their professional development; (iii) developing a systematic approach to teacher training in these schools; and (iv) building strong networks between local stakeholders (centred around cooperation between schools and employers) to enhance the quality of practical training. The funds of the European Union (EU), primarily the European Social Fund, provide sound future possibilities for implementing these efforts. Two additional fields of intervention were envisaged and deemed necessary in one of the locations due to specific challenges faced by VET students in that particular environment. They focus on students' community engagement and the development of a social cooperative.

Four distinctive sets of recommendations were drafted based on project findings. National-level recommendations emphasise the need to approach the development of three-year VET in a more strategic manner. They stress the need for more ownership and cooperation among key stakeholders. This is particularly important given the demographic trends which pose a serious threat to the very existence of three-year VET in Croatia. Local-level recommendations advocate a focus on the relational and subjective aspects of social inclusion and on building synergies with national-level efforts. Moreover, strong local institutional cooperation will be a key element in the successful utilisation of EU funding opportunities. It may be rational in the (current) phase of designing these funding opportunities to consider dividing fund provision for VET into several different lots. This would mean targeting different beneficiaries and directing a smaller number of more substantial grants to the national level. It would also involve decentralising part of the funding to foster local autonomy. Funds would then be accessible to all communities with logical and feasible plans on how to develop local VET systems. Moreover, the importance of funding schemes available through the Lifelong Learning Programme, which are accessible to vocational schools, should not be neglected, especially given the reduction in staff training opportunities. Civil society organisations should be important agents for stimulating the civic and community participation of VET students. Their role could also entail providing an employment niche for such students facing the greatest barriers in labour market integration through social entrepreneurship initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

In Croatia, vocational education is not generally given consideration when addressing social inclusion issues or challenges facing youth in general. It gets sidestepped in the popular push towards expanding access to (tuition-free) tertiary education. It is generally ignored when efforts are made to facilitate youth engagement via a civic education curriculum. All the while, the general public remains primarily concerned about the travails of 'the young and educated'. The role of vocational education is not usually framed in terms of student needs with respect to learning and personal development, emancipation, social integration or active citizenship. Instead, it is understood almost exclusively as a means of fulfilling labour market needs. The latter notion is indeed important for advancing the skill production regime, general societal development and enabling individuals' active participation in society via gainful employment (see Shavit and Müller, 2000, on the notion of a safety net). However, focusing solely on the labour market fails to take into account students' needs and preferences, or social cohesion in general.

In this research effort, we aimed to take a more holistic look at the various distributive, relational and subjective aspects of social inclusion¹ and exclusion (see Bhalla and Lapeyre, 2002; for local adoption see Šućur, 2004) as they act out in the life world of students themselves, their school and community environments, and as they are framed by the institutional, strategic and normative framework of three-year vocational education in Croatia.

Even in good times, it is well established that the relative labour market position of youth in Croatia is poor (ASOO, 2011; Crnković-Pozaić, 2009; Matković, 2009a, 2010a and 2011). Their insertion into the labour market upon graduation is slow in European terms. It is true that graduates from purely vocational, three-year upper secondary education have some advantage over early school-leavers. They also have better job entry dynamics than graduates of general or technical upper secondary education (although this has been affected by the economic crisis). However, it is a common finding that tertiary education graduates have by far the most favourable labour market outcomes.

Entering a track with purely vocational content and apprenticeship experience might be, if arranged

properly², more likely than the general education track to keep underachieving students from dropping out and to socialise them into the labour market. However, such tracking might contribute to marginalisation by severely limiting vertical educational mobility (both in terms of formal options and curricular content). It could also lead to the 'corralling' of underprivileged youth with no other options, thus limiting their social networks and separating them early from the mainstream of youth culture. This could ultimately lead them prematurely into precarious labour market positions, away from the spotlight of public concern about 'deserving youth'.

Social exclusion among young people is not a widely researched area in Croatia. However, the existing research identifies its occurrence among upper secondary education dropouts and vocational education graduates (Koller-Trbović, 2009; Koller-Trbović et al., 2009). Some insight is provided by recent efforts to 'hear the story from a youth perspective' (Buković, 2012). This shows that young people generally relate the difficulties they face to the broader economic situation and the destruction of the former industrial potential (and corresponding social and economic relations). This is accompanied by a sense of a deepening 'generational gap', which is particularly relevant in terms of the subjective dimension of social inclusion. Vocational education is also seldom the focus of education research. Some forays into it indicate the different latent value structures in vocational schools compared to youth in general, the different conflict resolution mechanisms associated with them (Vlah et al., 2011a and 2011b) and the higher incidence of violence in vocational schools (Bouillet et al., 2005). As far as the involvement of the school community is concerned, some research efforts show deficiencies both in terms of social dialogue (Parkes et al., 2009; ETF, 2010 and 2011), and (at the level of compulsory education) underwhelming parental involvement in school matters (Miljević-Ridički et al., 2011), which is weaker than foreseen in legal provisions.

To date, there has been little debate or knowledge about social cohesion and inclusion issues and mechanisms as they have emerged from the current setup of vocational secondary education. The aim of this mapping effort is to shed some light on those issues as they emerge from the normative framework and school data at hand. We also aim to gain a deeper understanding of the situation from national and local stakeholders.

¹ Social inclusion has been conceptualised as having two key aspects: distributional aspects relating to access to resources including employment, education and public services; and relational aspects which concern the social networks between people and the connections in wider society. In terms of the relational aspect of social inclusion, a high density of cooperation within the group, a strong identification with the group and active participation in communities are considered signs of inclusion. Active participation implies a socialisation process, which incorporates individuals and groups at different levels of society (Vranken and Frans, 2001). The third, subjective aspect of social inclusion is concerned with feelings of belonging and inclusion.

² Some research conducted on the coordination between employers and the education system indicates that the apprenticeship system is operational. However, linkages, communication and public support mechanisms are very weak and there is much room for improvement (Herceg, 2010; Crnković-Pozaić, 2009), in particular in the field of social partnership (Parkes et al., 2009; ETF, 2010 and 2011).

1. INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK AND POLICY PROCESS AT NATIONAL LEVEL

1.1 SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

The institutional framework of the education system in Croatia has undergone substantial changes since the mid-2000s. In vocational education this has included a new Act on Vocational Education (2009) and an Act on Primary and Secondary Education (2008), the introduction of formal pedagogical standards (2008) and a National Framework Curriculum (2011), adoption of the Bruges Communiqué (2010) and the Strategy for the Development of Vocational Education 2008–13. At institutional level, several changes have emerged: the formation of the autonomous Agency for Vocational Education and Training in 2005, which was in 2010 merged into the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education; a substantial expansion of the apprenticeship system for craft programmes (circa 2004); and the setting up of an external and internal evaluation process and information infrastructure (VETIS, E-matica). However, the basic structure of upper secondary education has remained unchanged since the three-track system was reintroduced in 1991³. Following the completion of eight years of compulsory education, students may compete to enter one of the three major upper secondary education tracks available: the most prestigious general grammar schools (*gimnazija*); the four-year technical vocational track; and the three-year craft and industrial vocational track.

As our effort focuses only on three-year vocational education, some structural figures must be put in context. According to the Labour Force Survey (*Anketa o radnoj snazi*, LFS), the share of workers with three-year vocational education remained relatively high and stable during the recent period of growth (32.8% in 2004; 32.7% in 2008). However, this group was struck particularly hard during the recession as its share in total employment fell to 27.9% by 2011. On the flip side, the average number of people with this level of education registered with the Croatian Employment Service (*Hrvatski zavod za zapošljavanje*) decreased steadily while economic growth was strong: from 124 000 in 2004 to 81 000 in 2008, outperforming the general decline in unemployment (310 000 to 237 000). Consequently, the share of people with three-year vocational degrees in total unemployment declined from 40.1% to 34.4% during this period. Since the crisis began, the number of unemployed people with three-year vocational education has increased by 36%, reaching 111 000 in 2012. This was consistent with the

general increase in registered unemployment (averaging 324 000 in 2012) and the share of this group in total unemployment remained unchanged. However, research carried out while developing sectoral profiles (ASOO, 2011; Matković, 2012) indicates that the decrease in labour market entry dynamics during the crisis period was worse for graduates from three-year vocational courses than from other levels of education.

Enrolment in three-year vocational programmes has seen a steady decline over the past 15 years. Thus the number of students completing the final year of such programmes declined from 21 000 in 1998 to 16 000 in 2004, less than 13 000 in 2008 and about 11 000 in 2011 – effectively halving in just 13 years and declining as a share of upper secondary education graduates from 40% to 26%. The decline in cohort size (from 58 000 in 1998 to 46 400 in 2008) translated into a reduction in the number of entrants only in the three-year vocational programmes. The number of placements in more popular technical and grammar schools remained steady over the years due to an unchanging bottom-up system of setting entry quotas (see Section 2.2.2; and ASO, 2006). If a vocational programme (regardless of type) in a particular school was filled to capacity in a specific year, it would commonly propose having the same entry quotas for the following year. This resulted in an entire demographic decline affecting exclusively three-year vocational programmes, in particular the least popular sectors within it. If this trend continues, this principle could soon leave three-year VET in ruin, as the cohort size of youth aged 14 (entry age for upper secondary education) will decline from 49 510 in 2012 to 41 243 in 2016⁴. It will then remain around this level for the next 14 years. Around 13 500 students entered three-year VET in 2011. A sharp demographic decline of 9 500 is expected in the coming years (between 2011 and 2016). A continuation of the enrolment patterns and principles applied for the past 20 years will result in only about 4 000 students in three-year VET by 2016. This will represent about 10% of the cohort with the poorest grades, leading to a perfect storm of social exclusion, hard-to-teach students and a small pool of vocationally-trained workers ready to enter the labour market.

At policy level, vocational education is most often framed within the 'skills mismatch' framework (see, for example, Joint Memorandum on the Employment Policy Priorities (*Zajednički memorandum o prioriteta politike zapošljavanja*) and Strategy for the Development

³ The 1975 career-oriented education reform (*usmjereno obrazovanje*) in Yugoslavia abolished purely vocational and general tracks. Its aim was to increase mobility and eliminate stratification. However, it was riddled with criticisms and problems and abolished in all but name by the mid-1980s (Matkovic, 2010).

⁴ The data on current compulsory education enrolment delivers consistent results: a decline of about 8 000 students – from 48 417 graduates in 2012 to 40 393 who are due to graduate in 2016.

of Vocational Education 2008–13). In other words, the focus is on the need for relevant competences, programmes and the involvement of employers. While there is some high-level involvement of employers in recently established sectoral councils and the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts (*Hrvatska obrtnička komora*) has long been involved in craft education, this has resulted in very few initiatives or emergent solutions. Sectoral profiles, LFS data and data from the Croatian Employment Service do not indicate huge differences in employability or mismatch among graduates from various fields of education (ASOO, 2011; Matković, 2012).

Priorities relating to social inclusion set out in the Joint Memorandum on Social Inclusion (*Zajednički memorandum o socijalnom uključenju*), the education sector strategy and the focus of the general public were notionally aimed at tackling dropout. One of the initiatives formulated was to make upper secondary education compulsory. The share of early school-leavers in a cohort, measured both by LFS and aggregated administrative data, is very low (LFS estimates hover around 5%). However, it is concentrated in vocational education, particularly in three-year courses where enrolment macrodata indicates that up to one-sixth of the cohort do not complete the programme they enrolled in.

Social inclusion efforts in education are either aimed at the integration of special needs students (whose numbers have remained steady throughout the years) or Roma (who are starting to reach upper secondary education in greater numbers, mostly via short vocational courses).

However, no efforts have been made so far to quantify or articulate broader issues with respect to social inclusion in vocational education. Social cohesion is mostly an unknown concept, even though the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth has translated key Council of Europe documents which address social cohesion. In general, no social cohesion indicators have yet been adopted or measured either at national or local level.

1.2 THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

According to the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, about 70.7% of regular upper secondary education students in 2011 were enrolled in a vocational course. The two main tracks in the vocational system are three-year industrial and craft programmes and four-year technical vocational programmes. Vocational schools with four-year programmes account for the majority of students enrolled in upper secondary education (43% in 2011). Such ‘technician’ programmes, although nominally vocational, enable access to the state matriculation exam. This puts the four-year graduates on track to tertiary education with no formal restrictions – a

pathway that most of them pursue (ASO, 2006; and ASOO, 2011). On the other hand, three-year vocational programmes (which accounted for 26% of enrolments in 2011) focus exclusively on preparing graduates for labour market entry. There are two main sub-types: (i) predominantly school-based programmes for industrial and trade occupations; and (ii) an integrated educational model (*jedinstveni model obrazovanja*, JMO) delivering training for craft occupations through apprenticeship arrangements. In 2011, the JMO was attended by about two-thirds of three-year VET students – 8 600 out of 13 500. These programmes do not enable access to the matriculation exam. Nor do they provide a pathway to tertiary education – students need to complete the fourth year and take the matriculation exam to qualify for tertiary level entry.

Students with physical or learning disabilities generally have three options. One option is to pursue regular programmes accompanied by individualised support. Another possibility, in the case of those with severe disabilities, is to enrol in adapted programmes which prepare them for so-called ‘auxiliary’ vocational occupations. Alternatively, they enter special educational institutions, which tailor their pedagogical approach and infrastructure to the needs of this student category⁵.

Graduates from craft programmes can proceed to sit a ‘master’s’ exam, enabling them to start their own businesses, employ workers and train apprentices. About 1 000 people per year pass this exam. In order to qualify, however, the candidate must have two years of prior employment experience within the occupation. In the current climate, this condition can prove quite challenging for young people, as labour demand is weak and many craft businesses are struggling due to the crisis.

As far as the institutional framework is concerned, vocational content within secondary education falls under the auspices of the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education (Agencija za strukovno obrazovanje i obrazovanje odraslih, ASOO). The Education and Teacher Training Agency (Agencija za odgoj i obrazovanje) is responsible for the general education content. The Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts is heavily involved in craft programmes with respect to their curricula, apprenticeships and practical exam evaluation.

However, unlike the standardised state matriculation exam, which was introduced in 2010 in general secondary education, the evaluation of education outcomes for three-year programmes is organised at school level. Two master craftspeople, selected by the county branch of the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts, are involved. Technical school students face no formal barriers in taking the state matriculation exam (and most do take it, albeit in general with weaker outcomes than grammar school students). Students completing industrial and craft programmes, on the other

⁵ The aforementioned data does not include these students, who accounted for 1% of the generation enrolled in 2011.

hand, face significant barriers on their potential pathways to tertiary education. Those aspiring to continue education require a great deal of determination and have to acquire a lot of new skills and knowledge (Crnković-Pozaić, 2009, p. 14). Consequently, according to the Eurostudent 2010 survey (Farnell et al., 2011, p. 38), only about 9% of students in professional higher education and no university students have previously completed three-year vocational education. Legislative changes in 2012 obliged all schools with three-year programmes to organise an additional (tuition-free) fourth year for students aiming to continue to tertiary education⁶. However, the results of this study (elaborated in Section 2.3) indicate that this provision has had little effect in practice so far, as most schools fail to organise this additional year due to a lack of material and human resources and a lack of interest in the scheme.

Following legislative reforms in 2009, the national Council for VET has become a key body within the institutional framework of VET in Croatia. It acts as a high-level forum for discussion and coordination between competent stakeholders. The 17-member body includes representatives from the education system and related agencies. It also includes representatives of the Croatian Employers' Association, the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts, the Croatian Chamber of Economy, trade unions, academia and civil society organisations (*organizacije civilnog društva*) working with people with disabilities. Despite its mostly advisory role, the Council for VET has the necessary competence to propose education sectors to the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports provided it has received a positive opinion on the proposal from the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education.

Vocational education is currently divided into 30 specific vocational fields, grouped in 13 broad education sectors, each having a sectoral council⁷. Most sectors include both technical and vocational courses. Although a large number of programmes are available, only a few dozen are attended by more than a handful of students.

While the curriculum is established at national level, the schools are run and managed by school boards. Three members of the board are elected from the ranks of teachers (one through the works council), one by parents and three by the founder (county⁸). Since 2001, the school principal has been elected by the board. Wages are paid from the state budget, but running and investment expenses are financed from the county budget. This accounts for the importance of the county education department, which is also the primary source of scholarship grants for students. However, total local government expenditure for upper secondary

education has nosedived during the crisis, dropping by 26% between 2008 and 2011 (from EUR 96.2 million to EUR 71.6 million). Schools themselves have some leeway to adapt the teaching plan and programme; according to the provisions of the Act on Vocational Education they may amend up to 15% of the vocational curricula. Moreover, some autonomy is granted when it comes to adhering to pedagogical standards in line with the resources available to the school. The schools also have freedom with regard to the choice of teaching approach and literature outlined in the study plan. When it comes to hiring and firing, school autonomy is limited: while decisions are made at the school level, each action is subject to the approval of the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports.

1.3 THE POLICY PROCESS AND THE POLICY DEBATE

The Croatian policy approach to social inclusion and cohesion in the VET system is structurally defined by two crucial parameters: the institutional division of the VET system into three-year and four-year vocational schools and the conceptual framing of social inclusion phenomena by Croatian policy makers.

The division of the VET system described in the previous section strongly influences the underpinning processes and practices of key institutional stakeholders. As noted in the national interviews, national educational policy makers tend to focus on four-year technical schools. A larger number of students enrol in these schools and most of them take the state matriculation exam and proceed to tertiary education.

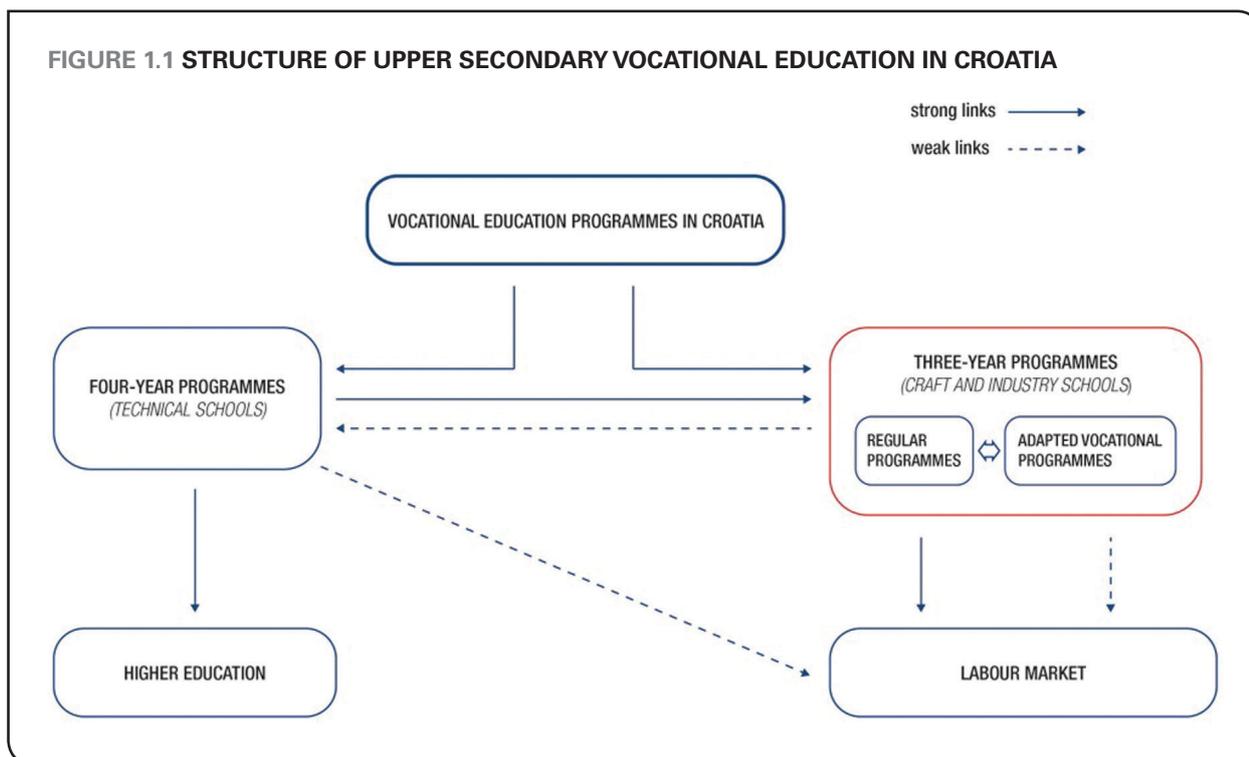
Views also seem to differ as to who should have general jurisdiction over the three-year VET curriculum. At ministerial level, this kind of ambiguity exists between the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports and the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Crafts. When it comes to implementation, a similar dynamic can be detected between the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education and the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts. Moreover, it seems that the institutional design does little to foster cooperation. Findings at national level indicate a tension between certain stakeholders who see the development of the system in different ways (e.g. education policy makers and employers and their representative institutions; curriculum development bodies and the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports). Several interviewees stated that 'it's all a formality, there is no real cooperation' and 'we lack coordination'.

Academic mobility is certainly an issue relating to this strict institutional division of the VET system. Analysis of key policy documents shows that, whereas vertical mobility is adequately defined in terms of content, policy instruments that are put in place pose questions in terms of their adequacy and feasibility. Horizontal mobility is broadly defined as changing school or programme

⁶ Such a route was previously an opportunity within the paid-for adult education sector, and one which about 1% of tertiary education students in 2010 pursued (Farnell et al., 2011).

⁷ Sectoral councils are composed of representatives of key stakeholders within specific education sectors. They are tasked with providing advice to the ASOO regarding issues such as defining necessary levels of vocational qualifications and their content; analysing competency requirements within the respective sector; promoting employment; and developing educational profiles.

⁸ Counties are regional-level, self-governing units in Croatia. State territory is divided into 20 counties. The capital, Zagreb, is a city but it also has the status of county with all the corresponding administrative jurisdictions.



within the same qualification level, usually in situation when student is not achieving the expected progress. The national interviews are quite informative when it comes to shedding light on the practical outcomes of these institutional provisions. With regard to vertical mobility, interviewees predominantly seem to think that the barriers that three-year VET graduates face in passing the state matriculation exam are often insurmountable. These barriers exist on two fronts. One is the content of this exam, which seems to overwhelmingly favour those completing general courses (in grammar schools). The second is the organisation and implementation of the additional fourth year these students need to take as a prerequisite for accessing the state matriculation exam. Since 2012, the opportunity to complete this year should be offered by schools free of charge. Yet one of the interviewees stated that schools do not tend to encourage this since they believe that these students are not capable of completing the fourth year. National interviewees predominantly evaluate horizontal mobility as difficult. One respondent contrasted the Croatian practice to the Danish one, whereby apparently ‘you can reach the matriculation stage for a bricklayer and then decide you want to be a waiter’.

The second key parameter influencing the policy debate and process is the framing of social inclusion phenomena, usually in terms of special educational needs and harmonisation with labour market demands. This is reflected in both the analysis of key policy documents and the national interviews. For example, in most national interviews, social inclusion is defined as relating to the position of VET programmes vis-à-vis the labour market or relating to children with developmental difficulties. Only one interviewee stressed the challenges faced by students from lower economic backgrounds. Such constrained perception of social inclusion among

the key stakeholders in vocational and educational arena might contribute to a reductive approach to policy design and implementation in this field. For instance, the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports was identified as the responsible institution by an interviewee for whom social inclusion means working with children with developmental difficulties.

The general impression obtained from the interviews is that social inclusion and in particular social cohesion are not frequently used terms. This conclusion is reflected in answers to the question about whether the issue of social inclusion and VET was represented in national policies. One interviewee said: ‘The social dimension is continuously being left out.’ Another commented: ‘Inclusion escapes our focus.’

This research indicates that policies relating to social inclusion and cohesion in the VET system cannot escape the wider context of contemporary educational policy reforms. Due to the constraints of this report, we can only present the most important topics relating to this category. The first one is the recognition of the ‘international dimension’ in educational policy making in Croatia. This refers to the tendency to try and harmonise educational policies in Croatia, primarily with processes at EU level but also more broadly. The United Nations (UN), United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (Unicef) and Copenhagen criteria are mentioned in these terms. The second important theme is the question of strategic thinking in educational policy making. There are different perspectives on this issue. On the one hand, some interviewees mentioned that there was a lack of strategic thinking in VET, particularly in terms of enrolment quotas and labour market needs (‘enrolling students who can’t get a job afterwards’). On the other hand, a number of interviewees claimed that

good strategic documents exist in Croatia. According to these interviewees, the implementation is problematic, both at school level and in terms of national decision making. Moreover, two interviewees pointed out that the VET sector was too fragmented and there were too many vocational schools and programmes. According to one of these interviewees, this situation results from a rigid staffing policy in the education sector, implying that some programmes are maintained so that teachers can retain jobs. An interesting point to note here is the emphasis in several of the interviews on the fact that enrolment quotas for secondary education and three-year VET should be set according to labour market needs. The implication is that it is unclear whether Croatia needs to increase the proportion of people with tertiary level qualifications, which would mean expanding the grammar school track. This is, of course, closely related to the funding issue, which is perceived as a general challenge. However, within upper secondary education, funding for VET was presented as particularly problematic. These programmes are more demanding in terms of funds for workshops, laboratories and various material costs, all of which are paid for by the county. The importance of having funds for hiring teaching assistants was mentioned, especially in the context of the demanding profile of students enrolling in three-year vocational programmes.

A further theme relates to the National Qualifications Framework. It entails a long-standing process supported by EU funding, whose efforts are coming to fruition with the recent adoption of the act governing its implementation. This may have implications across the board for the VET system, when it comes to redefining access to horizontal and vertical mobility, social dialogue within VET and recognition of informal and non-formal learning outcomes. The National Qualifications Framework was greeted with a variety of reactions in interviews. These ranged from being seen as unnecessary bureaucratisation to necessary standardisation in view of the European Qualifications Framework. The second key reform worth stressing is curriculum modernisation. 'Modernisation' in this context means creating a curriculum that responds to the needs of the labour market. The documentation review clearly indicates that considerable efforts and funds (mainly EU-sourced) have been invested in developing qualification standards. The aim is to make them more compatible with occupational standards. This discourse clearly indicates the future trend in curriculum reform: creating 'new' qualifications by merging several 'old' ones, in a way that their content fits the demands of several occupations. Such a reform may yield deep structural changes to the VET system, influencing many of its aspects, such as staff employability and allocation, number and network of vocational institutions and the way in which practical training is delivered.

2. VOCATIONAL EDUCATION PRACTICES FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION AND SOCIAL COHESION AT LOCAL LEVEL

2.1 METHODOLOGY

The research team used a participatory research approach. This required the formation of national and local research advisory boards comprising national and local stakeholders, which were consulted about the implementation of the research process. The national research advisory board consisted of ETF social inclusion network members. Also included were representatives of the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education as well as researchers from the Centre for Educational Research and Development (Centar za istraživanje i razvoj obrazovanja) a research unit within the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb. At the October 2012 meeting, the national research advisory board was instrumental in proposing contacts for national-level interviews and suggesting issues to be discussed with stakeholders. It also recommended additional legislation and reports for desk research. The November meeting of the national research advisory board focused on the agenda for local interviews. At the final March 2013 meeting, it discussed findings and concentrated on implications and recommendations. The local research advisory boards were smaller, consisting of three to five members. They held an initial meeting to discuss how the research could be adapted to suit the agenda and concerns of the stakeholders involved. In more pragmatic terms, they covered local stocktaking, contacts and research implementation issues. Their final meeting was devoted to a discussion of general and specific research findings, in particular the implications and possibilities they opened up with respect to policy measures and follow-up actions in each of the school communities.

The choice of school communities was limited to seven schools. These were recommended by research network experts based on the criterion of good social inclusion practices. The three schools actually participating in this research differed substantially in terms of the geographic, structural and economic environment (see situational analysis), though all were involved in similar fields of education⁹.

⁹ Personal services courses were taught in all three schools; agriculture and construction in two; and garment, transport and food processing in one school each. Notably, no schools taught courses in the large, traditionally masculine sectors of mechanical or electrical engineering. None offered a school-based salesperson course (the single most populous three-year vocational course) or hosted three-year courses in tourism and hospitality.

The Croatian research team included four researchers (Nikola Buković, Karin Doolan, Natalija Lukić and Teo Matković), who divided the fieldwork, liaison and analytical tasks between themselves. Also on the team were three research assistants (Karlo Kralj, Maja Uršić Staraj and Ines Vrbanec), who were tasked with labour-intensive logistics, note-taking and document review.

The mainstay of the research itself, at both national and local levels, were semi-structured interviews based on the general topic templates set up for all countries. The research team and boards modified questions and sub-questions to fit the national context and institutional setting of the respondent (e.g. local level, school-based, public institution or employer-related). The interviews typically took about 45 to 90 minutes each. They were conducted in the interviewees' workplace by a team consisting of a researcher (who led the discussion) and an assistant (who took notes). In order to build rapport and create a relaxed ambience, and also because of time and budget constraints, no sound recordings were made of the interviews. Instead, a real-time transcript was produced. The assistant and researcher then 'tidied up' this transcript within 48 hours of the interview. All the participants signed informed consent forms, which specified research details and guaranteed confidentiality. Participants were notified of the possibility to veto parts of the reports where their statements were used. In total, the research team conducted 10 interviews at national level¹⁰ and 11 or 12 interviews in each of the school communities¹¹. This resulted in a total of 35 local interviews and 10 interviews at national level.

We used focus groups to map the practices from the viewpoint of students, parents and practical training providers. We did this as a broad array of positions and fruitful interactions could be expected from a non-hierarchical group with no tight bonds. Due to practical considerations and a need for articulate and informed participants, we selected students and parents from (elected) school student and parental councils. Schools and Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts county

¹⁰ The following institutional stakeholders (in alphabetical order) took part in the interviews: Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education, Croatian Business Council for Sustainable Development, Croatian Chamber of Economy, Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts, Croatian Education and Teacher Training Agency, Croatian Employment Service, Ministry of Labour and Pension System, Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, Ombudsman for Children, Union of Autonomous Trade Unions of Croatia.

¹¹ These included school employees (school principal, school pedagogue, teacher of general and vocational subjects, apprenticeship coordinator) and stakeholders in the school environment who were connected in some way with VET and various aspects of social inclusion (a major employer involved with the school; representatives from local branches of the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts; representatives from the Croatian Employment Service and social care centres; individuals from city and county government involved in education, social issues and youth; a youth civil society organisation).

branches assisted with the selection of practical training providers and sectoral employers. This resulted in a total of eight focus groups. Three groups consisted of students and parents. Only two included employers, as at one locality only one out of three invited employers attended. Here also, participants signed an informed consent form, guaranteeing confidentiality. Due to the amount of verbal interaction, taking notes by hand was deemed impractical and all focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed.

The quantitative segment of the research was based on student and teacher questionnaire templates set up by the London School of Economics team. The research team modified and amended these templates to suit the Croatian institutional framework and answer some additional points of interest while maintaining consistency with the template provided¹². Questionnaires were vetted by schools before the application survey was printed. With instructions attached, the questionnaires were explained and then administered by school staff during classes with first-grade and third-grade students in mid-December 2012 and mid-January 2013. They took up to 30 minutes to complete. No problems were reported in collecting the data. All the students in attendance participated, resulting in a total of 363 responses (172 from Čakovec, 123 from Karlovac and 68 from Rijeka). Data was entered manually and no major validity issues were identified during the process. For the sake of confidentiality in the school environment, the teacher questionnaire was administered through an open online survey. The Limesurvey platform and information on the school bulletin board were used. An invitation letter with a link was emailed to all teachers by the school principal. After one email reminder, the final response to the online teacher survey was reasonably good, with 60 respondents in total (33 from Čakovec, 14 from Karlovac and 13 from Rijeka). This translated into a completion rate of between 26% and 43% of all teachers associated with the given school.

Desk research itself focused on mapping VET-related social inclusion and social cohesion issues within the current laws, strategies and action plans, as well as in their official implementation reports. A total of 36 documents were examined. In addition, an extended academic and project-based literature review was conducted. Twenty-two entries were explored, but most academic papers proved unsuitable with respect to the conceptual framing of this project.

While writing up this report, a literature and document review was prepared. Relevant labour market and education indicators were collected at county level based on the stated criteria. Survey-based descriptive statistics were listed (cross-tabulated by the school or other criteria which turned out to be important over the course of the interviews or literature review). The information from the focus groups and interviews was analysed using qualitative data analysis software.

¹² Questions about ethnicity and place of residence were deemed not to be appropriate in the context, due to the sensitivity of the former and the risk of uniquely identifying respondents in both cases.

The process of coding was divided into two phases: initial open coding and axial coding. Throughout the process, the coded segments were grouped into similar concepts and, in the final stage, categories. Although the process of analysis was led by the research tasks, the analytical approach was inductive. It was conducted by systematically looking at (mostly) qualitative data and building categories. Inter-coder reliability was also carried out with two researchers comparing their coding process.

2.2 SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

2.2.1 SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

The first school is situated in the moderately large city of Karlovac (population: 56 000), located half an hour's drive from Zagreb on a high-density traffic route towards the Adriatic. The city is in the centre of a county of the same name which had a total population of 129 000 in 2011; of the total population, 6 295 people are aged between 15 and 19 years. The county was deeply affected by the war and was partially occupied in the 1990s. Over the past decade, between 2001 and 2011, the total annual number of upper secondary education graduates in the county of Karlovac declined from 1 348 to 1 165. Almost all the decline happened in three-year vocational programmes, where the graduate cohort fell from 503 to 331 (a drop of 34%). Consequently, about 28% of current upper secondary education graduates in the county have this type of degree (compared to 24% in Croatia as a whole). The chosen school, with 440 students, is one of eight upper secondary schools in Karlovac. The school runs courses in the vocational sectors of construction, food production and personal services. Most of these are three-year apprenticeship-based JMO programmes. Some courses (for non-craft vocations) are run as traditional, school-based, three-year vocational programmes. The school also offers two four-year technical programmes and three adapted programmes for special needs students. A student cooperative operates in the school.

The second school is situated in the medium-sized town of Čakovec (population: 27 000), located in the county of Međimurje, close to the Slovenian, Hungarian and Austrian borders. The county is quite small (118 000 residents in 2011) and the demographics are relatively favourable in the Croatian context (6 971 residents aged between 15 and 19 years). Between 2001 and 2011, the total annual number of upper secondary education graduates in the county of Međimurje declined from 1 382 to 1 228. Most of the decline happened in three-year vocational programmes, where the graduate cohort fell from 595 to 426 (a drop of 28%), but still comprised a respectable share of about 35% of upper secondary education graduates in Međimurje. The chosen school is one of five in the county that provides craft and industrial vocational courses. About 660 students attend the school. The school population is mostly female, as the school offers 12 regular vocational courses in the

fields of agriculture and food production, transport, textile and leather, and personal services (two of them are four-year technical courses). It also offers two adapted programmes for students with special needs. These usually have vacancies at the beginning of the programme, but are filled over time by students who cannot cope with regular programmes. The school also offers adult education programmes. The school dropout rate is quite low, but the incidence of teenage pregnancies is quite high.

The final school chosen is situated in Rijeka on the northern Adriatic coast. It is the third largest city in the country (population: 129 000) and is situated in the rather populous Primorsko-goranska county (population: 296 000). The 15-19 cohort is quite small (13 792 in 2011). Due to the long-standing low fertility rate in the region, the annual number of upper secondary education graduates declined significantly between 2001 and 2011, from 3 381 to 2 635. As was the case elsewhere, most of this decline was reflected in three-year craft and industrial VET. The numbers fell from an already low base of 1 114 down to 525, more than halving within a decade. Consequently, only 20% of the upper secondary education graduates cohort in the Primorsko-goranska county currently enter the labour market with three-year VET credentials (the figure for Rijeka is 15%). Thus the issues and challenges relating to the tracking and enrolment of students with low academic achievements might be more pronounced in a large and relatively affluent city such as Rijeka, which has a broader choice of general and technical programmes. The chosen school is one of eight providing three-year vocational courses in Rijeka. It is quite small (four classes per year) and runs three-year vocational programmes in the fields of agriculture, construction and personal services. About one-third of enrolled students have a health diagnosis, usually putting many of them on track to adapted (special needs) vocational courses.

2.2.2 LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

To begin with, it is important to highlight the dominant discourse on three-year vocational education among individual and collective actors. Community and school actors in all three locations point out the distinction between three-year VET students and those who are enrolled in 'more prestigious' schools (grammar or technical programmes). Assigned a lower status, these students are seen as 'bad students', not only in terms of their underprivileged social backgrounds, but also because they are considered to have poor learning capabilities and display problematic behaviour. Vocational occupations are perceived in a similar way. Community actors (particularly employers) share stories of the downgrading and decline of crafts and trades, which in the pre-transition period were significant pillars of economic development and an important source of employment and income.

Within the national context, Čakovec is a locality that was spared the effects of war. Light industry (meat

and food production, struggling textile and clothing facilities) and agricultural production are present in the city. The unemployment rate is below average (14.9% in 2011 compared to 17.0% at national level). However, GDP per capita is quite modest and was reported at EUR 7 885 in 2010 (78% of the national average). Similarly, Rijeka could be considered an affluent city according to statistics indicators. The average income in Primorsko-goranska county is 123% of the national average (GDP per capita was EUR 12 343 in 2010) and the tourism sector is strong (though not in Rijeka itself). Registered unemployment is low in the national context (13.4% in 2011), as is social assistance coverage (1.0% of the population in 2011). The county of Karlovac, once known for its strong industrial base, has retained an above-average concentration of metalworking and food manufacturing industries. However, its GDP per capita in 2010 only reached 74% of the national GDP per capita (EUR 7 404). Consequently, the share of the population receiving social assistance stands at 4.8%, twice the national level. The county is also plagued by above-average unemployment (24.2% in 2011, compared to the national average of 17.0%). This is higher than the other two localities. Participants at all three localities stress the negative influence of the economic crisis, not just on the economy (where it has disproportionately decimated employment in crafts and reduced the share of vocationally educated persons in total employment) and on the cash-starved VET system, but also on community life in general.

At institutional level, vocational schools interact with county education departments, social protection providers, county branches of the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts and other actors whose resources are needed. However, inter-institutional cooperation can be described as unilateral or bilateral, rather than systematic collaboration within a network of interdependent actors. Schools tend to perceive themselves exclusively as knowledge providers. They do not recognise the wider role they should play in a network of actors contributing to the production of skills or overall community development. The school in Čakovec has tried to adopt such a proactive role, the most tangible example being a joint advocacy effort with an international company and the local branch of the Croatian Employment Service (CES). This effort is directed at a national level and aims to re-establish a programme for shoemakers, who are continuously in high demand in the local labour market. This is one example of collaboration between schools, employers and public institutions in the local community that could lead to better integration of VET students in the labour market. However, this is an exception and cooperation is limited to the provisions prescribed in the regulative framework as the dominant model of interaction.

In the final years of compulsory education, prior to admission to VET, the local branches of the CES provide a professional orientation service to many students, particularly those with special educational needs, health problems and learning difficulties. The CES is recognised as the greatest authority in career counselling and in providing insights into the local labour markets. However,

its role in relation to vocational schools is limited to conducting professional orientation prior to entry into vocational education and in issuing recommendations for direct or privileged admission. Expectations towards the CES are quite high within the local environments, since stakeholders and schools consider tracking students and providing career guidance and education for the labour market to be predominantly the role of the CES. At the same time, community actors recognise a lack of support and assistance for counselling and career guidance of students during the education process but do not propose any solutions. Schools generally perceive the tracking of students, provision of career guidance and facilitation of entry to the labour market as 'the job of other institutions'. However, there are examples of a school pedagogue or psychologist accepting the role of career guidance teacher. Moreover, about one-third of teachers participating in the survey report providing career counselling personally to their students. This is usually an individual, rather than a systematic institutional effort. Like schools, other institutions do not recognise that facilitating the access of students to education or the labour market is part of their role. The admission quotas are determined at the local level by several stakeholders who often approach the issue from different angles. In order to provide evidence-based information, the CES conducts analyses to forecast labour market demand at county level and draws up a list of occupations in short supply. It then formulates recommendations on admission quotas and scholarship grants. The disparity between vacancies in three-year vocational programmes and admission quotas is discussed by school representatives with the county education department and other relevant community actors (the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts, the CES). Decisions made at county level are then forwarded to the ministry which consults further and makes final decisions. These decisions are usually in line with the county recommendations (ASO, 2006, p. 69). Local community actors see schools as primarily 'protecting the jobs of the teachers' by continuing to train students for occupations with low employment rates for graduates. Yet it is common for both school-based and other actors to frame the enrolment issue in terms of high student interest in courses which fare poorly on the labour market, e.g. hairdressing. Enrolment is perceived to be diverted away from less popular courses which are actually in demand in the labour market, but fail to enrol students even despite the availability of scholarships. The imminent substantial decline in the size of cohorts entering upper secondary education is perceived as highly problematic for VET. A 'fight' for students is sometimes apparent among vocational schools in the local areas.

Prior to admitting students, vocational schools, sometimes together with local partners, engage in promotional campaigns in primary schools to attract students to craft and trade occupations. Such promotional campaigns are sometimes not welcomed by the primary schools, which may be reluctant to present 'less valued' occupations to their students. For example, according to the regular CES survey on students' aspirations conducted in primary schools, only a small

minority declare an interest in enrolling in vocational education (8% in Primorsko-goranska and 17% in the county of Karlovac). However, as part of a Ministry of Science, Education and Sports e-development strategy, secondary school admission will be administered online starting in the 2013/14 school year. This practice could introduce significant changes, increasing the transparency of the selection process but also putting an end to the face-to-face school contact with students through which they receive advice. Some participants showed a positive attitude towards e-admissions, saying that it will be easier to fill the places in courses. Others, primarily teachers, are worried about the potential difficulties relating to the computer illiteracy of students' parents, potential problems in the functioning of the online programme and uninformed course choice due to the lack of initial contact between teachers and students.

Material resources (equipment, space, school materials) play an important role in enabling schools to adequately deliver the education process. In the context of the economic crisis, there is a special focus on the lack of material resources as a barrier to skills development. The secondary schools are under the jurisdiction of the regional government and the counties are perceived as a main reference point for funding policy. Research participants, both from the vocational schools and communities, refer to the county when addressing the distribution of financial resources, admission policy and quotas. Within the context of the crisis, schools have expressed despair at the current lack of financial resources for basic materials, staff training, school equipment (in particular vocational workshops and tools) and space. There is a realisation that the government is less and less likely to provide the funds for these needs. Instead, there is a strong push (facilitated by the county government) for schools to rely on their own donor-driven projects as a substitute for insufficient public funding. The three participating schools all engage in projects to compensate for the lack of opportunities to develop skills or acquire equipment. However, they rely mainly on international assistance and EU funding. Only a few scholarship grants exist at local level. These are geared primarily at steering students into occupations in short supply in the labour market. Such incentives are administered by the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts and subsidised by the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Crafts. For example, the ministry subsidised 350 annual scholarships in 2012. The city and county sometimes also offer incentives for enrolment in occupations that are in short supply. However, in the student survey, only about 11% of respondents reported receiving scholarships, whereas 4% of survey participants indicated receiving scholarships for attending vocational occupations in short supply. In addition, the CES pays for the medical exams for students entering occupations that are in short supply. However, interest in VET for such occupations remains low, sometimes leading to the cancellation of courses if fewer than five students apply. Another consequence of such cancellation is that grants are not awarded. Stakeholders interpret this as indicative that these courses are not regarded as beneficial and many doubt the employment prospects upon graduation, especially in the context

of high overall unemployment. Some municipalities and cities include needs criteria as one way of getting scholarships (3% of students participating in the survey reported receiving a stipend from such a source). However, apart from scholarships for Roma students, none of the interviewees were familiar with scholarships available to students from low income families. This is indicative of the lack of scholarship schemes that encourage entrance to VET in general or schemes based on the economic or social status of students. These findings are in line with data gathered through policy document analysis and national interviews. Karlovac had a financing scheme (*Stipendika*) aimed at students in secondary and higher education in which employers and the county coordinated scholarship efforts. It was recently revoked due to a lack of financial resources and an unwillingness to continue with the scheme after initial trials.

The introduction of the apprenticeship-based JMO model of vocational education for craft occupations, which has a greater emphasis on firm-based training, has made the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts the most important partner to schools throughout the education process. In these programmes, the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts is responsible for quality assurance when delivering firm-based training, administering scholarships for craft occupations and promoting craftsmanship. The Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts organises 'master craftsman' exams and participates in exam commissions in three-year craft VET programmes. The collaboration between vocational schools and the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts is comprehensively prescribed by the Act on Vocational Education and by two additional sub-legal regulations. The Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts considers quality assurance and the creation of a synergy between craftspeople and schools as its main task. Some incentives are available from outside the education system. These are channelled by the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Crafts. The total grant amount came to only EUR 300 000 in 2011. Despite agreement among all the actors that supporting funds are limited, the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts reports that employers seldom use the funds earmarked for apprenticeships. This is due to a lack of information about available options and a lack of skills when it comes to writing and preparing proposals and documentation. The situation is in line with the results of the survey on educational needs in small and medium-sized firms and in the craft sector, carried out by the Croatian Chamber of Economy and the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts (Bejaković et al., 2010, p. 16). To increase the quality of the current apprenticeship model, the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts advocates stronger incentives for employers, who lack the motivation and support for training apprentices in the current context.

With respect to relationships between schools and employers, we can distinguish two types of cooperation. The first type of cooperation relates to practical training. It is usually limited to the school practical training coordinators making monitoring visits to students' practical training mentors. Four hours a week are allotted

for the supervision of firm-based training for each JMO class supervised. Schools feel there is a lack of cooperation on the employer's side. Employers offer a significantly different perspective. They commonly state that there is a need for better planning of admission quotas. Employers also believe that stronger links need to be created between schools and local business. Many employers reportedly hold the schools in high regard, being former students themselves. They would like to play a larger role in shaping the curriculum and the educational content in VET. The second type of cooperation occurs outside of practical training. Such cooperation is very weak and limited to occasionally asking employers' professional opinions (e.g. about equipment). Apart from exceptional cases in which there is strong cooperation with large employers, there is a tangible need for improvement in this area.

Relationships between schools and employers are especially important if we consider the labour market situation in the various localities. In Karlovac, the number of unemployed people aged between 15 and 19 years, with three years of vocational education and no prior work experience, increased from 172 at the end of 2008 to 278 at the end of 2012. The annual transition rate of this group into employment declined from 42% to 30%. In the case of the same type of group¹³ in Čakovec, the number of unemployed increased significantly from 123 at the end of 2008 to 277 at the end of 2012. The annual transition rate of this group into employment declined from 55% to 34%. The increase in the number of unemployed people in the same type of group in the Primorsko-goranska county (where Rijeka is situated) was less pronounced than in the other cities, growing from 217 at the end of 2008 to 327 at the end of 2012. However, the annual transition rate of this group into employment declined significantly from 42% to 26% (still slightly better than the national average, which declined from 40% to 25%).

There is a noticeable difference in perceptions of small employers (mostly craftspeople) and industry representatives. In the current environment, where there is little chance of offering apprentices a permanent position, small employers perceive apprenticeships to be a burden rather than an opportunity to develop good employees. For local employers, students often lack the social and entrepreneurial skills that are required. There is a perception of a downgrading of crafts, predominantly among employers and the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts. This is because the qualifications needed for some of the occupations can be acquired through short-term adult education programmes, raising questions about the skills that are needed for craft jobs. This is often contrasted with the pre-transition period when the role of craft was more central to economic and social development. However, regardless of the perception of skills mismatches, craftspeople are often unwilling to take on the burden of training future workers in the current environment.

¹³ This refers to unemployed people aged between 15 and 19 years who have completed three years of VET education and have no prior work experience.

Industry employers who were interviewed take a different view. They stress that students are there to learn the trade and become good workers. These employers see apprentices as future employees and therefore focus on developing their skills. In the case of one international manufacturing firm, even language courses are provided as a part of the apprenticeship. From the perspective of social inclusion, vocational education should equip graduates with skills that will enable them to play an active role in community life and gain economic independence upon entrance to the labour market. It is questionable whether this aim can be achieved given the attitudes among community actors described here.

Through the education process, vocational schools can get some institutional support from providers of social protection, specifically social welfare centres. Such support is available particularly in the case of juvenile delinquency, family problems and the requirements of special needs students as prescribed by regulations at national level. However, these are mostly ad hoc interventions made on a case-by-case basis, rather than a continuous cooperative process. In Rijeka, we observed stronger and continuous cooperation with the local social welfare centre, showing that schools and individuals can change the prescribed patterns of collaboration once they take the initiative to do so. At the same time, this cooperation results from the need for the intervention of the social welfare centre in the school. Welfare institutions emphasise the lack of preventive measures in primary schools and the lack of guidance throughout the education system as a major problem. As already mentioned, VET is often the educational choice of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Students are therefore frequently the beneficiaries of social assistance administered by the social welfare centre. This assistance is intended for special needs students, students with disabilities and people from disadvantaged family backgrounds. They can seek accommodation in student dormitories (even though only 5% of the students surveyed have such accommodation) and subsidies for purchasing books¹⁴. Čakovec and the surrounding county have a substantial Roma minority, accounting for the high prevalence of welfare assistance in the county. Roma account for 5.0% of the population. Many of them attend the vocational school chosen for this case study.

All three locations had initiated local partnerships for employment, and the county of Karlovac was one of the early adopters in the mid-2000s. However, only the Čakovec school is part of a local partnership for employment (which also includes civic organisations and the CES). Yet interviewees did not report that this partnership led to better links among institutions.

The Education and Teacher Training Agency was identified as a relevant actor in only one of the locations (Rijeka). The agency is a public institution responsible for

the provision of supervision and advisory support in the area of general education in Croatia, including general subject matter taught in vocational education settings. On receiving complaints, its role is to go out into the field and assess the situation. Both the agency and most of the teachers we interviewed recognise the lack of support and guidance for students with special needs, especially when it comes to securing their access to the apprenticeship system, preventing them from gaining relevant skills.

Local civil society organisations focused on youth engagement sometimes partner with vocational schools to promote social awareness or support student participation in community life. Karlovac has quite a lively youth civic scene in the town and a city programme for young people, which touches upon social inclusion issues. The civic youth scene in Čakovec is also rather strong and several students from the school participate. However, formal school cooperation with civic organisations is limited to participation in donor-driven projects, which require students to be included in volunteering activities or socially responsible actions. Civil society organisations see this cooperation as weak and unsustainable. They stress that students from grammar schools or four-year vocational programmes participate 'by default', compared to their peers in three-year vocational programmes, whose participation is limited to school-related projects. Some of these students continue to be socially engaged after the projects are completed. For civil society organisations, participation in social events and activities has a positive effect on facilitating contact and removing barriers between otherwise distant groups. It also helps students to develop entrepreneurial and social skills by participating in projects and activities or informal education. In Čakovec, it is difficult to include Roma in community life in general. There is a common perception that students have little initiative when it comes to community involvement.

Some of the stakeholders were considered to be potentially relevant, but are not directly linked or related to the vocational schools. Nor are they currently involved in any aspect of the education and skills development system. Such institutions are family centres, the Croatian Chamber of Economy and the regional development agencies.

2.3 SOCIAL INCLUSION IN VOCATIONAL SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

2.3.1 ACCESS TO VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

In the broader social context, interest in VET is waning. The demographic decline, the expansion of tertiary education and the deterioration of crafts and industry in Croatia (in particular during the economic downturn)

¹⁴ Social welfare centres in Karlovac and Čakovec reported awarding education-related assistance in a total of around 900 to 1 000 cases in 2011; the figure for Rijeka was lower at about 500. However, this number includes support for all levels and tracks of education.

have negatively influenced the general attractiveness of the VET system, leading to vacancies in vocational schools. This may result in a disparity between market demands and the supply of vocational occupations. This in turn could lead to unfavourable conditions in the labour market, including poor earning opportunities for VET graduates. Nonetheless, the research findings suggest that students' interest in vocational education is not market-driven, but is based on how popular and recognisable certain occupations are among a generation of students. For interviewees in schools and local communities, the popularity or unpopularity depends largely on spatial and temporal elements, such as how an occupation is perceived in the local community. For example, some courses are becoming increasingly attractive due to the current positive perception in the media (e.g. master chef) or because they lead to an occupation that enjoys popularity among students (e.g. hairdresser for the female student population).

In the Croatian secondary education system, a distinction is made between four-year secondary education programmes (with a prescribed academic score threshold for admission) and three-year vocational programmes (with unconditional admission in terms of academic scores from lower levels of education). Students with a better academic performance compete for places in four-year secondary school programmes (grammar and technical). For 'low performers', the three-year vocational programmes are their 'only option' if they wish to continue to secondary education. This streaming process and differentiation has a long-lasting effect on the chances for equal access to higher levels of education, leaving VET students in an underprivileged position. At an individual level, entering a three-year vocational track is not a choice but rather the only option for the majority of underperforming students. However, interviewees from schools and local communities suggest there is a perceived distinction between those who wish to continue the family business, perceived as 'elite students', those with an interest in the occupation but without family links, and those who enrolled because it was their only option due to poor school performance. For students forced into VET, this can lead to a lack of motivation and a lack of interest in the educational content. It can also influence subjective feelings of belonging to a group in the school. In terms of social profile, the majority of students interviewed were described as coming from low-income families often with a history of family problems and juvenile offences and where the parents had a low level of education; from minorities (Roma in particular); and having learning problems or disabilities (in Rijeka one class consists only of students with special needs). Survey results show that one in three students reports some health or memory issues and three in five reside in small settlements (less than 2 000 inhabitants). Most of them travel daily. With regard to social background, the survey responses show that 70% of students' fathers and 48% of their mothers are in employment. However, one in five fathers has only compulsory education and half completed only three-year vocational programmes themselves. The results thus indicate strong social reproduction. However, some

heterogeneity (and intergenerational downward mobility) is evident: one-quarter of students' fathers completed four-year vocational education and 7% had some kind of tertiary education. Similar patterns were found to be stable over a decade using LFS data (Matković, 2009b). In addition, financial deprivation does not seem to be widespread from the students' perspective, as only one in six reported having substantial financial difficulties. For interviewees, the socioeconomic and educational status of the student's family and their ethnic identity are commonly perceived as relevant elements that put them at risk of social exclusion from a relational, subjective and distributional perspective.

As previously stated, no formal barriers exist in terms of academic scores at compulsory school level when it comes to the VET selection process. This contrasts with the selection process in four-year programmes and grammar schools. In general, there are enough vacancies for all applicants. There is a common perception among interviewees that, due to the small number of interested candidates, access to VET is open, and it does not represent a point of exclusion for any social group. However, a signed training agreement and a health certificate are prerequisites for admission to VET programmes. Nevertheless, in the three locations studied, interviewees claim that schools provide support in signing a training agreement for those who cannot find an apprenticeship by themselves. Similarly, those with health problems are also accepted but directed to 'more suitable vocational courses'.

In addition to their regular programmes, vocational schools frequently offer adapted vocational education programmes intended for students with special educational needs. Students with visible or invisible disabilities are recommended for adapted courses based on their lower learning abilities. Such abilities are identified during the counselling that is organised by the Croatian Employment Service in the upper grades of primary education as part of 'professional orientation'.

Regulated positive discrimination exists for some groups of students at the point of access. Some are permitted to enrol directly in regular programmes (children of the victims of war). Children with disabilities and learning difficulties can enrol directly in adapted vocational programmes. This process is tightly regulated. Additional points can also be awarded to Roma and children facing unfavourable economic, social and developmental conditions.

Most of the interviewees share the impression that equal access is granted to students willing to enter the VET system. Nonetheless, differentiation takes place in the choice of vocational courses and several factors are recognised at this point. Firstly, as demand is greater than supply for 'attractive' vocational courses, students must be ranked in order to decide who will be admitted. Ranking is commonly based on prior academic success and those with higher achievements have an advantage. Consequently, those with the lowest grades are not able to choose 'attractive courses', leading to a downward spiralling effect. The end result is that students with

lower academic achievements are grouped together in unpopular courses. In our student survey, only 30 to 50% of student tailors, horticultural workers and bakers claimed that these programmes were their first choice (compared to between 65% and 88% of students on other courses).

Secondly, some vocational courses have requirements (in the sense of physical capabilities) that limit their accessibility to students with health conditions. Such health conditions can vary from allergies to serious physical disabilities. Those students are directed to suitable regular courses or available adapted vocational courses. Some interviewees stressed that those who do not acquire the necessary medical certificate are 'either streamed into other occupations, or directed to other schools', noting the example of machinists who 'must have good eyesight'.

Thirdly, a significant gender dimension can be observed in the selection process. Some courses tend to be considered 'male' and other 'female', effectively directing (and constraining) the choice students make. As one teacher pointed out: 'You may find a male among hairdressers, [but] it is close to impossible to find females among house painters, car mechanics and so on.'

Fourthly, in one of the locations studied, students with a low economic status are sometimes allocated to courses that lead to occupations in short supply since scholarships are provided only for these courses.

This informal streaming process takes place during the selection process. It commonly leads to a situation whereby vacant places in the less attractive, low-status courses are filled with students with special needs, ethnic minorities, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or lowest achievers (in the sense of academic scores). This concentration of underprivileged groups in VET could influence social integration into the community's social networks and social (non-)participation, potentially leading to a sense of dissatisfaction, low motivation and unfavourable learning outcomes.

2.3.2 EXPERIENCE IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE EDUCATION PROCESS

The experience of individual actors (students, teachers, parents) within the VET system is framed by the broader socioeconomic context of crisis and prevailing financial difficulties. The impact of institutional and broader structural elements is directly visible in poorer working conditions (lack of equipment and basic work materials). Indirectly, this impact is reflected in the lack of professional training of teachers, students' participation in competitions and other events and a scarcity of scholarships. The lack of financial resources is aggravated by the economic crisis – the education budget was reduced by 25% between 2008 and 2011. This poses a risk factor for social inclusion since a school that is deficient in material resources runs the risk of

increasing the gap between what is learned in the school environment (with inadequate equipment) and the practices adopted in future workplaces, limiting the possibilities for in-school skills development. From the perspective of social inclusion, the lack of opportunities for teacher training and development and the overburdening of staff due to limitations on recruitment put teachers' capacities under pressure. Interviews suggest that the lack of financial resources is a special risk factor for Roma, economically disadvantaged students and those travelling from rural areas. While local travelling expenses are mostly covered, these groups of students lack financial resources for buying materials, books and other costs of school attendance and may not be as socially integrated as other students in the school community.

When the school environment was discussed, teachers in all three schools reported a lack of capacity for working with the demanding profile of VET students. Several factors contribute to this situation:

- a shortage of opportunities for professional development – teachers emphasise the need for skills development, particularly as most teachers of vocational subjects were not initially trained as teachers;
- insufficient competences for working with the special educational needs of students;
- a need for greater support and teamwork between the school psychologist, social pedagogue and teachers, as well as external support when needed.

Such a situation can lead to the overburdening of teachers as well as support staff. It signals a lack of capacity for inclusive education in those places where it is most needed: vocational education and adapted programmes. There is a common perception among teachers that the curriculum is outdated, which can influence the development of the necessary student skills. Teachers report that they adapt up to 15% of the curriculum content, which they are allowed to do to make it more suitable for VET students. Many also adopt an individualised approach for students with visible or invisible disabilities.

In terms of school relations, the quality of relationships between students and teachers differ in the various locations investigated. Depictions of student-teacher relations in the interviews vary from those governed by rules with 'few casual moments', to relationships described as 'warm, cooperative and caring', with a sense of closeness and respect. It seems that in one school, more than in the others, teachers prefer to assert their authority by regulating aspects of student conduct. Special emphasis is placed on 'classroom discipline', minimal deference to the teacher's status and 'paying attention' – as would usually be expected in traditional classrooms¹⁵. In the other two schools, relations tend to be less governed by rules. More cooperative student-teacher relations could

¹⁵ This finding is based on interviews with teachers and a focus group with students in that school.

contribute to a more open school environment and a better sense of social integration in the school.

The school-parent collaboration was described as satisfactory, both in the teacher survey and interviews. Parents feel adequately informed and involved in the school environment. They are regularly contacted regarding school absenteeism and are involved in the organisation of school events. In one of the participating schools, Čakovec, the principal emphasised that the involvement of parents is a necessity when it comes to minority children (Roma) in order to ensure their participation. Furthermore, the parent's engagement is recognised as relevant at the point of transferring between courses or programmes. Teachers also find that parental support is crucial when it comes to the decision whether to stay in school or to drop out. It should be noted that legal provisions allow for the possibility of greater involvement by parent councils with respect to school curricula and extra-curricular activities. However, such activities were not reported in focus groups with parents.

When it comes to student-student relations, conflicts occasionally arise in schools (conflicts between classes and tracks, rows over boyfriends, verbal bullying of those from rural areas). At the same time, there is a perception that the schools investigated in this report are quite safe environments and bullying ranked in the teacher questionnaire as the least prominent of student-related issues. Among students themselves, there are signs of differentiation. Group boundaries might emerge on the grounds of the students' socioeconomic background, whether they are from a rural background and the type of school programme they are attending. Differentiation by course reputation is noticeable between students in craft (three-year) courses and those in technical (four-year) programmes, while students with special needs tend to be 'invisible' in the findings. Students in the focus groups did not mention their peers on adapted programmes or recognise them as a special or separate group. This finding could equally be a sign of good integration within the school as well as a sign of social distance between regular and special needs students.

At an individual level, students participating in the focus groups reported feeling overburdened by the total amount of firm-based training and number of hours in school. Most apprentices reported working between 7 and 21 hours in a given week. Students stated that the sense of being overburdened had an impact on their learning outcomes, leading to lower levels of satisfaction and motivation, as well as absenteeism.

2.3.3 ACADEMIC MOBILITY AND STREAMING

When students move from one stream to another in the education process, it is important to ensure that they do not find themselves in a disadvantaged position as they enter the new stream. The discussion on vertical and horizontal mobility among students and teachers leads to the conclusion that streaming in VET has a temporal

and spatial dimension. Changing courses or streams between three-year and four-year programmes is usually allowed and encouraged at the start of the secondary education programme. Ideally, if students wish to change, they should do so in the first semester after they enrol in secondary school. As time passes, entering a different stream or course becomes more demanding for students, as the number of exams they have to pass in order to make up for the difference between programmes and the amount of catch-up required in terms of firm-based training mount. There is therefore a greater risk of failing an academic year¹⁶ when entering a new stream. The spatial dimension of streaming is important as well. Students travelling from rural areas or living in student dormitories sometimes decide to change school, making a new educational choice based on spatial proximity to reduce the financial burden.

A few streaming patterns can be identified among VET students. When it comes to horizontal as well as vertical mobility, changing streams usually happens between similar courses or programmes (e.g. from an adapted gardening programme to a regular gardening programme) since there are fewer exams that need to be passed in order to make up for the difference between programmes or required hours of practical training.

When it comes to vertical mobility, academic achievement is relevant. Students who underachieve and risk dropping out after they enter four-year programmes often take a chance and enter less demanding three-year programmes. Mobility from three-year to four-year programmes is more difficult. It is mostly merit-based as students need to have good grades in order for the teachers' council to allow them to transfer between programmes. Horizontal mobility may increase the chance of grade retention for some students who were unable to find an apprenticeship in time or to make up for practical training. It is important to state that horizontal mobility between popular and unpopular vocational courses is limited due to a lack of vacancies in the former.

Adapted courses for students with special educational needs usually fill up over time, as students who are at serious risk of dropping out sometimes also end up on these courses because they are considered to lack the abilities needed to follow the regular programme. Choosing a new, less demanding stream therefore acts as a safety net against dropping out of education. Occasionally, participants reported extraordinary cases in which students (Roma or students with disabilities) managed to achieve upward mobility within or between schools. However, such instances are rare and downward mobility is more frequent. These streaming patterns guard against students dropping out or failing an academic year, probably contributing to lower dropout rates in schools. At the same time, however, they lead to less beneficial educational outcomes. Viewed over

¹⁶ Croatia has a practice and policy of 'grade retention', meaning that a student who does not make satisfactory progress by the end of the school year can be retained in the same academic year as a remedial measure to help overcome his/her educational difficulties.

the long term, these patterns can influence students' motivation and, more importantly, their chances for economic integration in the community. For those who are allowed to enter a more demanding stream, there is a risk of poor academic achievement (the differences between exams are substantial) or failing the grade.

2.3.4 PRACTICAL TRAINING

The research participants' report on their experience with apprenticeships¹⁷ mirrors structural issues, such as the introduction of the JMO apprenticeship-based system and the general decline of employment in craft businesses, which affected the number of available apprenticeship positions¹⁸. Some school staff challenge the adequacy of the existing JMO apprenticeship system, in which firm-based training is supposed to comprise about half of the total student's workload. They complain about overwhelming paperwork for students; the difficulties involved in combining a large number of practical hours with the school programme; and the coexistence of the classical (school-based) and JMO VET model in three-year vocational education. However, craftspeople who participated in focus groups argue that more practical work for students and more cooperation between schools and employers is an advantage. They consider this to be an improvement on the previous system. At an institutional level, several barriers to inclusive apprenticeship were identified.

Firstly, there is a lack of quality assurance in firm-based training. According to both school and community interviewees, the students' experiences with firm-based apprenticeships can vary from their being used as free labour to gaining high-quality training that enables them to integrate well into the world of work and develop a work ethic. Students sometimes accept firm-based training wherever it is available (regardless of quality) due to the shortage of accredited workshops. The varied experiences of students indicate that there is no adequate quality assurance, which can affect students' development of professional skills and identity. Even though the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts stresses the quality of firm-based training, other actors emphasise that legal instruments and practices governing the apprenticeship system often do not pass the reality check. The end result is that sometimes training delivery turns out to be sub-standard¹⁹ and schools have no effective instruments to intervene. If no accredited employers are to be found in the school community, students are reportedly

sometimes allowed to train in unaccredited workshops or in the school. Moreover, the prescribed provision of a firm having the equipment capacity to carry out 70% of the apprenticeship programme autonomously is rarely observed. This indicates that there is a scarcity of the material resources needed for skills development in the VET system. However, the common theme in interviews is that students prefer apprenticeship placements to training. In our survey, the majority of respondents (57%) rate firm-based training as more useful than school-based training (for similar findings see Herceg, 2010). Only 16% report their apprenticeship as less useful than school or completely useless in terms of their vocational development.

Secondly, a discrepancy exists between the regulative framework for firm-based apprenticeship and informal practices. Employers often contravene the regulations by offering no remuneration to students. Despite being mandated in the apprenticeship contract, only one-third of survey respondents confirmed that they receive an apprenticeship allowance; about half of them receive it only occasionally. For employers, financial difficulties are claimed as the main reason for not offering remuneration. Students and parents also report that the minimum requirements in the training contracts are sometimes not satisfied. However, in contrast to small craft workshops, industry employers are more likely to comply with the regulations, including payment of remuneration to students.

Thirdly, from the teachers' perspective, employers lack pedagogical skills. Too often, they do not adhere to the school plan and programme and are not trained to work with students.

Fourthly, workplace training provision and scheduled tasks (work diaries) are formally monitored. However, this has little effect, as there is a lack of enforcement on the part of school representatives. Survey results show that just 38% of vocational teachers are in contact with employers. The interviews suggest that a minority of teachers believe that it is up to them to build connections with employers.

Finally, practical training is often not connected to the curriculum. The schools recognise the reluctance of employers to follow the curriculum for practical training, while employers and students claim that much of the prescribed curriculum does not match the patterns or scope of real work practices²⁰.

17 In the schools in the case study, some programmes were run as 'classical' school-based programmes (in the case of florists, gardeners, motor vehicle drivers and several construction-related occupations). However, little information was provided on the patterns of school-based practices there, apart from school-owned garden-plots and cooperatives.

18 As per data provided by the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts, the number of licensed craft and apprenticeship placements remained steady in the 2010–12 period, ranging between 10 100 and 10 250 and between 30 000 and 31 000 respectively. These figures still significantly exceed the number of students taking up apprenticeships. They are increasing at a reasonable rate in the counties of Međimurje and Karlovac, while some decline is evident only in the Primorsko-goranska county. Thus, qualitative perceptions are not fully consistent with the official quantitative figures.

19 One student on a car mechanic course was fatally injured in a workshop accident, just as our research got underway in November 2012. In 2011, the state inspectorate reported that five students had been severely injured during apprenticeships.

20 For example, the curriculum for practical training for a florist requires the student to spend a specific number of hours learning how to arrange flowers for wedding ceremonies. However, since most weddings are held on Saturdays and students train during the week, they miss out on that part of the curriculum.

From the employers' perspective, apprenticeships entail sporadic financial incentives and considerable expenses (student allowances). Craftspeople describe students as unmotivated and lacking the appropriate skills for work, especially social and entrepreneurial skills. They consider that the cost of having an apprentice in the current climate is high, with few advantages. Some of them perceive taking on an apprentice as 'doing a good deed' for students, not as an investment in a potential employee or in the development of the firm. Medium and large employers take a slightly different view on providing apprenticeship placements. They perceive apprenticeships as an opportunity to train and select a good worker. The medium and large employers we interviewed support the idea of on-the-job training and put more effort into improving the integration of an apprentice in the workplace. Employers in local communities rarely mention financial incentives that would support employers who take on apprentices. The interviews with employers and community actors suggest that there is either a lack of knowledge about available funds or a lack of willingness to apply for these funds due to administrative requirements and a general belief that the subsidies are not generous enough (see Section 2.2.2). The findings reveal a lack of equal opportunities for certain groups in finding practical training: students from ethnic minorities; individuals with visible and invisible disabilities; those travelling from rural areas; and students with a lower socioeconomic status. All these groups are at risk of experiencing greater difficulties in finding practical training, which can affect their learning outcomes and even lead to exclusion. These students sometimes end up doing an apprenticeship in the school, which can license a workshop and manage school-based training as a substitute for firm-based training.

2.3.5 DROPOUT

Throughout the learning process, potential exclusion points can lead to dropout. Students who fail a year²¹, attend classes irregularly or skip practical training face the risk of disciplinary measures escalating in exclusion from school. However, if disciplinary or academic problems arise, students are more likely to be streamed into an 'easier route'. This is common practice. Students who do face some kind of disciplinary measure usually do not end up being excluded. This kind of practice is in accordance with a pedagogical educational measure, known in Croatian as *mjera produženog stručnog postupka*: a grace period of three months before a decision on exclusion from the school is finalised. It aims to ensure that exclusion from the school is justified and the only option left. As a precaution against grade retention or repeating individual classes, teachers usually set lower criteria, provide additional instructions and repeat exams in order to assist students to pass.

The compulsory practical vocational exams (known as *kontrolni ispit* and *pomoćnički ispit*) qualify VET students for their occupation and include content related to the student's school and apprenticeship experiences (*kontrolni ispit* precedes *pomoćnički ispit*). These exams do not constitute a particular challenge. Students are given the opportunity to repeat the exams and sometimes are helped to pass them. Such practices are likely to decrease the incidence of dropping out.

Teachers and principals claim that school dropout tends to be rare²². They maintain that the decision to drop out is usually voluntary, made by the student and his or her parents, and not as a result of a disciplinary action or a decision by the school. On the one hand, from the perspective of school staff, a high dropout rate carries with it the risk of being labelled as a 'problematic school'; on the other hand, there is an institutionalised practice of staff doing everything they can to keep students in school. When students do drop out, participants cite reasons such as Roma cultural habits (marrying young); a lack of motivation for VET among students; juvenile delinquency; and the cost of school attendance (especially travel costs for those coming from remote areas). These elements pose a risk for students from already vulnerable groups to become multiply disadvantaged – because of their social profile and exclusion from education. As previously mentioned, teachers argue that parental support (or lack thereof) can play a vital role in the decision to drop out of education. This argument is in line with LFS findings that the risk of early school leaving is highest (and non-converging over time) among children of parents without upper secondary education and in the lowest income decile (Matković, 2010b). It is a cause for concern that none of the local actors recognise the need to follow up on students who drop out or to provide extra assistance to early leavers once they exit the VET system.

Several possible routes are open to those who drop out. They can apply to the Croatian Employment Service and use one of the available active labour market measures. Some of these measures lead to further training that enables early leavers to gain a qualification. Participants mentioned a number of other possibilities available to those who drop out. One option is to enrol in adult education programmes, usually offered in vocational schools (for which tuition fees must be paid) or in adult education institutions. It can be an important remedy to correct for early dropout and support second-chance opportunities. Some employers are still somewhat critical. They see these short courses as downgrading vocational occupations and are distrustful of competences that can be gained through such adult education training. Some members of school staff mentioned that if a decision is made within a prescribed time frame, early dropouts are allowed to return to school or enrol in a different school programme.

²¹ This refers to students who are retained in the same academic year – grade retention.

²² No reliable indicator on upper secondary education dropout currently exists at national level. The LFS-based share of early school-leavers has remained stable at about 5% over the last decade. Using this information, it is possible to estimate the share of people who fail to complete three-year VET programmes by comparing the number of students completing the final year and the number of entrants three years prior to this. Dropout estimates ranging between 13% and 17% can be deduced for the period between 2003 and 2011 (see ASO, 2006).

In addition, VET students in craft courses have the opportunity to gain a qualification by passing a specific exam known as *pomoćnički ispit* in the final year. With this exam they are not obliged to pass the final school examination (required to gain a high school diploma). They therefore have a qualification that is required in the job market but is not a secondary education diploma. According to the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts, this option is not being used in practice. All of the above indicates that better guidance and counselling is needed to make sure that students follow the most appropriate route. Better links with employers may be important in preventing dropout as well as improving apprenticeship training and assisting integration into the labour force.

2.3.6 TRANSITION TO THE LABOUR MARKET

At institutional level, transitions from school to employment are structured by regulations on the period of compulsory schooling, the minimum age of entering the workforce, and the required work experience before taking the master craftsman exam (two years). According to the interview findings, a number of obstacles are perceived at the point of transition from school to work.

Firstly, local community actors and school representatives have no evidence-based information on what graduates are doing after the three-year programmes. No tracer studies or any other efforts to track students' progress are reported either by schools or local authorities. They usually consider this 'the role of other institutions', delegating this responsibility to the Croatian Employment Service in particular.

Secondly, graduates entering the labour market (many at the age of 17) are subject to age constraints. In terms of social expectations, this age is not recognised as 'the appropriate age for employment' but the regulations also limit work for underage individuals. In the case of some occupations, such as truck drivers, a legal obstacle to employment exists, as a person is not entitled to drive before the age of 18. However, students often leave education, having passed the driving test one year earlier. This leads to a one-year gap between finishing education and being able to take up employment.

Thirdly, some participants argue that educational content does not match labour market needs or practices. Most identify the often outdated vocational content being taught as a barrier to entering the labour market. Students themselves feel insufficiently prepared for labour market demands, due to the poor quality of practical or firm-based training. Another factor is the lack of connection between what they learn in school and the way in which the work is actually done and the technologies and methods required by the employer. Such fears of students and teachers often coincide with employers' expectations who believe that VET graduates are not equipped with the appropriate competences (often citing the lack of social or entrepreneurial skills).

Fourthly, there are clear signs of a decreasing willingness on the part of employers to deliver apprenticeship training. Employers mention financial difficulties, unmotivated students, the time needed to train students and students not having the adequate skills to deal with customers as some of the factors that might influence their willingness to take on an apprentice. The notion that there is a lack of suitability for the labour market is prevalent among students, teachers, employers and local community actors. It represents a serious problem and puts students in an unfavourable position when looking for employment. It can make their passage to independence, inclusion and adulthood difficult.

Finally, local community actors state that schools provide no formal guidance on labour market opportunities. Students and parents generally lack knowledge on career options, conditions for continuing education and possible paths to employment. Some informal career guidance is recognised and schoolteachers sometimes mention connecting employers and students or helping students to find a job. However, recommendations are given only when requested by employers and usually only the top-performing students are recommended. In general, actors reflected on the weak links between schools and employers. The majority of contacts between schools and employers are related to employer-based training arrangements. Cooperation aimed at creating possible employment opportunities for graduates is the exception rather than the rule. One case of a proactive, joint school-industry initiative, which leads to better job prospects for VET graduates, was identified. Such initiatives were not identified among small businesses and craftspeople. The economic crisis has adversely affected students' chances in the labour market. Youth unemployment rates in the country are high and increasing; there is a lack of job placements. Such conditions make the school-to-work transition harder for young people in general and VET graduates in particular. According to participants, the positions offered to VET graduates are becoming more precarious and are more often seasonal jobs. Student survey data demonstrates a similar level of uncertainty about finding a job regardless of the course attended. The analysis compiled from the Croatian Employment Service data (ASOO, 2011) does not show any marked differences in employability. At the same time, there is still a perception among the interviewees that labour market outcomes vary between occupations, with some retaining a more advantageous position than others.

Despite the generally unfavourable situation, labour market opportunities and risks are clearly unequally distributed among specific student groups. Teachers perceive above-average difficulties for Roma and (in particular) students with disabilities and special needs. The prospects of employment for students attending special needs classes are perceived to be poor. Schoolteachers consider the purpose of education for these students to be 'rehabilitation' and not preparation for a position in the labour market.

At an individual level, students reported having a sense of insecurity and uncertainty about their chances of passing the state matriculation exam, entering tertiary

education and finding employment. The experience of uncertainty and fear can negatively affect a subjective feeling of inclusion in the wider community. Teachers and community actors predicted few possible outcomes for VET graduates. Getting a job placement through an apprenticeship is the most desirable option, leading students straight from school to employment. The second is finding a job placement in the student's field of education. A minority of students with a family tradition of craftsmanship are expected to continue the family-owned business. Based on feedback from graduates, teachers say that graduates are most likely to change career paths by being beneficiaries of active labour market services or by going back to school and taking a second chance by enrolling in the adult education courses offered by schools or adult education centres. Industry employers, more so than small business employers, state that they can offer opportunities to VET graduates since they always need 'good' workers and are more willing to invest in on-the-job training and workplace integration. Small business owners usually declare that few employment prospects exist for graduates due to the downturn in business activity. Among students, some share a belief that much better job opportunities will arise for VET graduates in neighbouring countries.

2.3.7 TRANSITION TO TERTIARY EDUCATION

At the point of transition to higher levels of education, research participants find more obstacles than opportunities for VET graduates. Teachers and local community actors emphasise that bridging the gap between three-year programmes and higher education is often extremely difficult for VET graduates, especially given the current regulations. Teachers claim that there is a lack of motivation and interest among students for continuing education. The survey results show that about 22% of respondents plan to pursue higher education. Students believe that access to higher education is 'not closed to those who are most dedicated'. Similarly, as at the point of transition from school to work, the lack of sustained and institutionalised advisory and information services is recognised as a problem for students leaving VET.

The interview and focus group results include reflections on some institutionalised obstacles in bridging the gap to higher education. Recent amendments to the Act on Primary and Secondary Education make it possible for all students from three-year vocational schools to complete the fourth year (required for entrance into higher education) free of charge. School staff consider the introduction of this regulation as poorly thought out and difficult to implement. Some of the perceived difficulties are: a lack of financial resources to conduct classes or pay teachers; complex and lengthy administrative procedures; time gaps (students cannot proceed into the fourth year immediately upon completing the third year); as well as preparation for teachers on how to deliver teaching and a significant number of additional exams (20 to 40).

For students, the large number of additional exams is discouraging and difficult to deliver within the stipulated time frame. Additional exams appear to be the main obstacle for VET students aspiring to higher education. Many of the participants emphasise that vertical mobility into higher education was also possible for VET students prior to the introduction of the new law. Previously, students had the option of applying for some professional higher education programmes. At the same time, participants argue that there was a high dropout rate among students who chose to follow this route due to gaps in their knowledge of general subjects and learning skills. Some see streaming outstanding students into the four-year programmes at the beginning of secondary education as a better alternative to passing additional exams at the end of the three-year training period in order to make up for the differences between the three- and four-year curricula. Another perceived barrier is the state matriculation exam. Teachers consider that such an assessment process significantly privileges students with training in the general secondary school education track. In particular, they believe that VET students who struggle to bridge the gap between three-year and four-year programmes will have a hard time in making up for their lack of knowledge in general subjects. Lifelong learning, involvement in adult education programmes or engaging in on-the-job training are perceived as realistic options for developing skills and professional knowledge. Therefore, to make vocational education more inclusive and provide equal opportunities, it is necessary to provide a greater variety of educational paths, make them more accessible to VET students and provide these students with the support they need to enter higher education if they wish to do so²³.

2.4 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL INCLUSION AND SOCIAL COHESION PRACTICES

The three participating vocational schools demonstrated numerous similarities in the institutional patterns, practices and educational and social profile of their students. Nevertheless, they differ in a few relevant aspects, such as school characteristics (size, courses offered); levels of participation in the school and local community; and groups recognised as vulnerable. In all three localities, the majority of participants reflected upon the students' socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Among these students, some groups are recognised as the most vulnerable. Examples are 'travelling students' coming from surrounding counties (due to the higher cost of school attendance) in Karlovac and, 'students with health problems' in Rijeka, (accounting for one-third of the school population). In Čakovec, Roma students are considered to be at a particular risk, suggesting that

²³ For example, students on four-year technical programmes are offered additional tuition by schoolteachers during their final year to improve their chances of passing the state matriculation exam.

disadvantaged groups in the local community are often over-represented in vocational schools. Although set within different socioeconomic environments (as described in the situational analysis), the majority of community actors in the research talked about the 'low status' of VET students and 'low value' of vocational occupations within their communities. The attitudes articulated range from subtle remarks about 'less competent students' (VET students) versus 'good students' (those attending grammar and technical schools) to pejorative statements about the vocational school²⁴ 'being a place for the disposal of students with disabilities' (the interviewee remarked that such a characterisation was unfortunate). However, this gap between VET and other secondary schools in the community was expressed more strongly in Rijeka than in the other two localities.

When the school communities are compared in terms of the relational aspect of social inclusion, variations are found in the degree of intergroup and intragroup differentiation and the level of active participation within the school and community. Students, teachers and outsiders (the rest of the community) each portray a distinctive picture of the VET student body. Three types of 'labelling' VET students are recognised as being potential barriers to integration in the school. Motivation is identified as a problem in school communities. Teachers refer to this problem, subtly classifying students on the basis of their educational and social background. Those coming from families owning a small company or craft business are labelled as 'motivated', compared to those who are 'unmotivated' meaning those for whom VET is a 'place of last resort'. Students themselves make a distinction based on quite different elements. They do not prioritise socioeconomic background. Instead, they refer to grouping in 'clans by course', 'by music and style' and 'socialising within the class'. It appears that membership of a particular school class, music and style are elements that draw students together within school communities. In the smallest of the three schools, students seem to have more cohesive relations. In the two larger schools, on the other hand, belonging to a different course leads to a different apprenticeship or school schedule and students appear to be more distant – or organised in smaller groups. In all three schools, those attending (three-year) craft and industry programmes are often attributed characteristics such as 'lack of academic skills'. Students attending (four-year) technical vocational programmes are deemed to be benchmarking with 'grammar school students'. This is a perception that prevails both among teachers and students themselves, signalling the potential social distinction between the two groups of students. In Rijeka, however, more positive characteristics such as 'sincerity' were attributed to three-year students, while four-year students were labelled as 'sometimes arrogant' by teachers and students. When it comes to relations with outside groups, responses within communities are ambivalent. Some participants claim that students continue their friendships from primary schools. Others

describe social boundaries between those attending vocational schools and those attending more established schools in the community.

The three schools differ in the degree of active participation in school-organised activities and in terms of community initiatives. School staff consider involvement in project-driven initiatives to be a pathway towards a more positive image in the community. The school in Čakovec is particularly proactive in reaching out to the community and enhancing the school's image. Consequently, the level of social engagement of students (in charity work, organising social events in school or working in the school cooperative) is higher in this school. In Karlovac and Rijeka, on the other hand, the level of student participation in school-based activities seems to be lower, although some community outreach is undertaken²⁵. According to participants in two of the localities, access is too often limited to high achievers who can represent schools in a positive way. This pattern limits the social engagement of low-achieving students, who are most in need of gaining new competences, particularly social skills. Some students recognise involvement in school-organised activities (such as the school cooperative²⁶ or international student placements) as especially beneficial to the development of entrepreneurial, social and language skills.

Students in the more engaged school still feel that they do not have equal opportunities to participate in international placements and projects. They see this practice as 'unjust'. While active social involvement yields multiple benefits in terms of facilitating social inclusion, students in general demonstrated a low level of enthusiasm and interest for community participation. It appears that student participation was rarely sought and student councils were not given a voice in important school decisions (curriculum, school schedule).

In terms of the subjective aspect of social inclusion, the feeling of belonging to the school and the wider community is seen as beneficial for integrating individuals into society. Teachers in Karlovac and Rijeka see VET students as vulnerable²⁷ and realise that they face barriers when it comes to the relational and subjective aspects of inclusion. In contrast, teachers in the school in Čakovec place the emphasis on students being economically and intellectually disadvantaged rather than facing the risk of unsuccessful integration into the school and wider community. This may suggest a more favourable starting point in the context of community integration and subsequently the feeling of belonging when compared to the other two schools. Students in Rijeka perceive school as a 'safe environment' and emphasise similarities rather than

²⁴ Students with special needs are often over-represented in vocational schools, as this is where special adapted programmes are offered.

²⁵ However, the student survey does not indicate any variation between localities. About 40% report participating in organised sporting activities and 6% engage in volunteer work. There is also substantial self-reported involvement in the voluntary fire brigade.

²⁶ As previously mentioned, the functional and active school cooperative in Čakovec has proved to be a particularly valuable practice because it seems to be the only platform where special needs students work on an equal basis with their peers.

²⁷ They describe students as 'neglected', 'in need of care', 'sincere and simple', 'those with lower self-esteem'.

differences between each other. It is important to note that the Rijeka school has a larger proportion of students with special needs, who have both visible and invisible difficulties, and this may bond them as a community. Although students share a sense of belonging to the school, they perceive boundaries and barriers outside of the school community. This is apparent in two respects. Firstly, the students feel a sense of uncertainty and fear about the future. This is related to a perception that they have little chance of finding employment or continuing their education. Secondly, they have a sense of 'being less valued' when they compare themselves to outside groups. In all three schools, students reported feeling unmotivated and disinterested throughout the education process. Students who are not appropriately integrated into the working environment also mentioned this in relation to apprenticeships. In addition to a lack of motivation, students in one of the localities reported being 'overburdened' by their workload and school activities. All of this perpetuates feelings of insecurity, lack of recognition and being less valued in the closer and wider community.

With regard to the distributional aspect of social inclusion, the findings suggest that all three localities share the external limitations for equipping VET students with adequate competences to facilitate the transition to the labour market. Limiting elements include a scarcity of apprenticeship vacancies (especially for certain programmes). This is one of the factors in the lack of quality assurance in apprenticeship provision. School communities are also similar in terms of a lack of information and a lack of cooperation with employers (apart from the 'formal' monitoring conducted by school representatives).

Labour market conditions in the local communities significantly contribute to the (lack of) opportunities that students meet in the local markets. Within the three localities, different groups are recognised as facing more difficulties both in finding apprenticeships and in making a successful transition to the labour market. In Čakovec, Roma students have more difficulty in finding firm-based apprenticeships. In the county of Međimurje in general, the discrepancy between 'Roma norms and habits' and the ones dominant among the general public is considered to be the main problem. In the Karlovac region, 'travelling students' face the same difficulty. In Rijeka, where a larger proportion of the student population in the examined school has health issues, the vocational education process has a largely rehabilitative function. The above-mentioned data indicates how meso-level elements (problems of localities) shape the chances for the successful social integration of students in terms of job prospects. At the school community level, similar practices and patterns appear in relation to the school-work transition. Participants at the three locations comment on the lack of information provided and the lack of career guidance at the point of leaving secondary education. In Karlovac and Čakovec, small business owners lament a lack of benefits and incentives for taking on apprentices. Industry employers, on the other hand, are more willing to invest in on-the-job training. The fact that there are more similarities than differences in terms of patterns and practices relevant to social inclusion, raises the question of whether some of these patterns could be characteristic of a larger number of vocational schools in the Croatian education system. It suggests that there is a need for more research on the inclusiveness of vocational schools.

3. ACTION PROPOSALS FOR SCHOOLS

As noted repeatedly in the course of this report, the similarities outweigh the differences in all three localities. However, the situation in Rijeka is distinctive in some regards. This is primarily because the school faces additional challenges relating to the makeup of the student population, the size of the school and how it is perceived within the local community. Consequently, the majority of recommendations are applicable to all three locations but consideration has been given to some specific local features. Two additional fields of intervention have been envisaged and deemed necessary for the Rijeka case in particular. The term 'field of intervention' represents what we believe to be an appropriate framing of the content laid out in this chapter. At this point, it is possible only to suggest somewhat general directions for schools and the relevant community stakeholders. The latter can enrich these with their additional knowledge of local context and develop coherent action plans.

The first relevant field of intervention relates to creating more equitable conditions for full participation in school life for all students. This is important especially when it comes to groups facing an additional risk of marginalisation, dropout and social exclusion. Primarily, these are Roma (especially in Čakovec), special needs students (especially in Rijeka), travelling students (especially in Karlovac) and those with weaker academic success. As mentioned in the local research findings, the selection of participants for school projects, such as international mobility opportunities like Leonardo da Vinci or Comenius (and their successors), should be more accessible to all students. This enables them to acquire valuable language and intercultural skills. It is crucial not to use these types of activities (only) as a means of promoting the school in an international environment, but also as a means of building the skills of the most disadvantaged students²⁸, who face the greatest barriers to social inclusion. Moreover, the importance of ensuring that students from all courses in the school receive equal access to quality equipment and learning materials cannot be stressed strongly enough. Students from less popular courses sometimes seem to perceive that schools do not pay enough attention when it comes to equipping classrooms for their vocational subject. This in turn reflects negatively on the subjective dimension of their inclusion in the school community. Schools should pay special attention to this aspect when planning future equipment and infrastructural investments. Moreover,

student councils in all three locations should play a more proactive role in helping school management to ascertain the needs of different student groups. If necessary, they need to voice their concerns about potential burning issues that are not being addressed by the school management. This process has (at least) two dimensions. Firstly, it assumes an open attitude by the school management when it comes to student participation. Secondly, it requires solid capacities on the part of school councils and an awareness (not detected in this research) that their primary role is to be 'a voice for students' in the school community. The required capacity building could be achieved through cooperation and workshops with local civil society organisations experienced in the field of civic participation.

All schools should pay due attention to the mechanisms of effective counselling and information provision for their students. This is particularly important when it comes to labour market prospects and opportunities for vertical academic mobility. This practice has proved to be overly sporadic in all three schools. If it exists at all, it is focused on final year students. These services should be available throughout the education process and accessible to students on a relatively regular basis. Such favourable outcomes could be achieved in two different ways. It could be done by establishing a school-based career guidance centre through project-funded initiatives, which would enable schools to equip adequate facilities and train staff members to provide high-quality career guidance. However, this may be viable only for larger schools – those in Čakovec and Karlovac. An alternative, which could work in all three schools, is to cooperate more closely with the local stakeholders that could provide students with relevant information about their future professional and educational choices: the Croatian Employment Service, the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts and the Croatian Chamber of Economy. This could be done through scheduled monthly appointments between interested students and competent professionals in these institutions.

Regardless of the crisis and fiscal constraints, continuous teacher training remains a priority in all three locations. This is especially important when it comes to special needs students, whom teachers recognise as a particularly challenging group to work with (as noted in Section 2.3.2). When faced with a limited supply of much-needed training opportunities, it is important for schools to approach the matter in a systematic and coherent way in order to optimise resource allocation. A questionnaire assessing capacities and educational needs could be distributed among school staff. This could foster a better understanding of priorities at school level, as well as the development of personal educational

²⁸ It should be noted that support provided within the framework of both Leonardo da Vinci and Comenius represents partial financing or cofinancing. Consequently, even if they are chosen for participation, students from disadvantaged backgrounds may not be able to cover the difference between the sum awarded and the full mobility grant. Schools should find ways to mitigate this challenge, perhaps by cooperating with the city or county authorities, which could cover the aforementioned difference.

plans for each teacher. It could optimise teacher training provision at school level. It could also prevent the potential neglect of certain teacher groups, such as general subject teachers. They often feel marginalised in the VET system, not least because most training provision in these fields is tailored to grammar school standards. Some initiative and coordination between the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education, the Education and Teacher Training Agency and the respective counties would be a most welcome incentive, complementing efforts undertaken by the schools.

It seems that the economic downturn has reflected negatively on firm-based training in all three locations. It limits the capacities of employers to take on apprentices, ensure a quality education process and comply with basic legal regulations, such as paying remuneration. As indicated by the results of the students' survey, 66% of students reported not receiving any type of financial compensation. As elaborated in some detail in Section 2.3.4, the continuation of these trends can lead to many unfavourable outcomes, for students and employers alike. Consequently, schools, employers and local communities need to pay attention to the quality of firm-based training. Activities could be structured around a flexible and operational working group, encompassing representatives of schools, local branches of the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts, the Croatian Chamber of Economy²⁹, individual employers and the Croatian Employment Service. The work done by such a group could yield a valuable analysis of key problems related to firm-based training provision in the local community. It could also be used to define a set of desired standards and an action plan outlining a way to achieve them. This could represent a basis for future successful applications for EU funds, primarily the European Social Fund (see Section 4.3). This should ultimately lead to strengthening ties between schools and business, fostering students' employability upon graduation and strengthening occupational standards, which are a point of particular concern for employers (especially craftspeople).

Finally, two additional fields of intervention seem to be of key importance in the context of the Rijeka school. The first one builds on the previously elaborated need to boost employment prospects for graduates of three-year programmes. However, the high percentage of special needs students who face additional barriers in finding employment in the Rijeka school indicates that additional intervention is required on the demand side. The establishment of a social cooperative whose mission is to take on individuals who face difficulties in finding employment in the labour market could be a valuable contribution to this solution. The high-quality practice in Čakovec and the Humana Nova social cooperative model could be utilised as a starting point for initial deliberations. This should be accompanied by the establishment of a group of local actors interested in setting up such an entity. The focus should be primarily on civil society organisations, orientated towards community organising, social services and social entrepreneurship. However, strong ownership is needed both by the school(s) and the city of Rijeka, which prides itself on an effective local inclusion policy framework. Once again, EU funding of a well elaborated organisational setup may provide resources necessary for initial stabilisation, bridging the gap until the cooperative's profits can guarantee its sustainability. The second intervention concerns the active engagement of students in the community. Despite the efforts undertaken by the school, stigmatisation of the students in the local community was detected, mainly through interviews with local stakeholders. Building stronger ties with local civil society organisations and visibly participating in regular civic activities in Rijeka, combined with individual initiatives tailored to students' interests, may be the remedy needed to challenge the current stigma attached to students coming from this school and help them to integrate into all aspects of community life.

²⁹ Their role could be of special importance, as they cover a considerably wider range of business entities than the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts, leading to much-needed diversification in apprenticeship supply.

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS AT NATIONAL LEVEL

The analysis of key policy documents indicates that the national approach to tackling social exclusion in VET is strongly (almost exclusively) linked to certain marginalised groups, primarily children with severe physical and mental disabilities and Roma. We do not want to downplay the importance of addressing barriers that members of these groups face in accessing different aspects of social, economic and political life. However, we find that policy design, which for the most part presupposes the needs of certain groups, fails to meet the mark when it comes to guaranteeing social inclusion to 'other' or 'all' members of society. It seems that three-year VET is one of the areas where a new approach is urgently needed. Current inclusion efforts fail to recognise one of the most important findings of this research: the risk of social exclusion is widely distributed within the student population, irrespective of affiliation to a specific (marginalised) group. Moreover, it often creates a political arena prone to processes of competitive victimisation. This leads to representatives of certain marginalised groups struggling among themselves for scarce resources, pushing out everyone who does not fall into this institutional grid. In order to reverse these unfavourable outcomes, policy makers at the national level should change the way they approach social inclusion phenomena. They should link policy responses primarily with citizenship rights, rather than membership of certain groups.

One of the examples where the weaknesses of the current approach to social exclusion are emphasised is the invisibility of VET students from disadvantaged social backgrounds in both national and local interviews and in policy documents. It seems that most stakeholders assume that these students make up the majority of those enrolling in three-year vocational programmes. This assumption makes the challenges that they face into a sort of a mainstream phenomenon that is not worth addressing, apart from a vague idea of destigmatising vocational schools and students. Consequently, opening up access to adequate scholarship grants for these students would not only improve access to VET, it would also have positive effects on the quality of VET. It would allow students to focus completely on their studies, reducing the risk of dropout and making them more competitive once they enter the labour market.

National policy makers should urgently address issues of both horizontal and vertical mobility when it comes to three-year vocational programmes. The first step in

regard to horizontal mobility is to address its incomplete legal definition. The key element that must be stressed is the difficulties faced by students who wish to transfer between programmes in different educational fields. Adequate mechanisms fostering horizontal mobility within the VET system then need to be designed and put in place. A key issue relating to vertical mobility is the current model of the additional fourth year, after which students from three-year vocational programmes could continue to higher education. Both national and local interviews indicate that this provision is not likely to deliver the desired outcomes, raising the need for further reflection and evaluation. The recently adopted Act on the Croatian Qualifications Framework may offer an opportunity to create a more feasible pathway for these students. Nevertheless, it seems that part of the solution lies in providing support at an earlier stage to students who demonstrate an interest in transitioning to higher education. It may be feasible to combine high-quality career guidance throughout the education process with the possibility of taking additional educational modules, to timely prepare students both for the state matriculation exam and the challenges of higher education. This should be compatible with the content and implementation of the 'additional year', if it is to remain a precondition for accessing higher education. The extra year ought to function almost exclusively as a time to prepare for the matriculation exam and higher education. It should not be treated as a way of acquiring a four-year technical qualification, as is currently the case. It is difficult to envisage any other reason for graduates of three-year vocational programmes to obtain this type of qualification, other than gaining access to higher education, as four-year technical programmes are poorly recognised in the labour market. Such a reform may lead to the optimisation of both students' and public investments; students not having to take numerous (unnecessary) additional exams; and the state not allocating funds to interventions that are unlikely to yield a desired outcome (a successful higher education candidate).

The capacity of both teachers and apprenticeship providers to deal with the demanding profile of students enrolling in three-year vocational schools emerges as a relevant topic, mostly in local interviews. National stakeholders, primarily the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education and the Education and Teacher Training Agency should aim to respond to this need, building a robust network of continuous support and education for all those involved in the VET process. Regardless of the economic downturn and fiscal constraints, further investments in additional staff and equipment remain not only a worthy social investment, but also a burning need if quality leaps in inclusiveness are to be achieved in any aspect of the vocational education process.

National level stakeholders, primarily the Ministry of Labour and Pension System and the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Crafts, need to incentivise schools and employers to make full use of the possibilities offered by the firm-based training and apprenticeship systems. When it comes to quality assurance and safeguards against exploitation in the apprenticeship model³⁰, the involvement of trade unions may be the answer. EU countries with strong apprenticeship tradition, such as Austria and Denmark, have adopted this approach. Decision makers and trade unions could therefore take the necessary steps to increase their involvement in the provision of practical training and other processes contributing to the quality of VET.

Finally, a set of rules and principles regarding enrolment placements ought to be established. These should account for the change in population size at county level as there is little merit in any of the previously mentioned efforts if three-year VET is about to implode due to demographics in the period between 2013 and 2016. The nominal adjustments in enrolment to all upper secondary education tracks should be proportional to population change³¹. In parallel, opportunities for mobility (both vertical and geographical), high-quality training, financial support and student involvement and expression could make three-year VET more lucrative. This is necessary to avoid losing a stream of skilled and qualified workers (and suitable apprentices). Otherwise, three-year VET and the employees working in this sector will bear the brunt of the demographic change and the country could lose an important part of its skill production regime. This requires urgent dialogue both at the educational policy level and within the upper secondary education system.

4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS AT LOCAL LEVEL

Local level findings show that there is little systematic cooperation between schools and relevant local stakeholders. They indicate that structural obstacles hinder cooperation, which seldom goes beyond meeting prescribed legal provisions. Examples of this limited cooperation are the involvement of county branches of the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts in licensing firm-based training or the intervention of the social welfare centre if requested by schools. This refers

particularly to the lack of cooperation between schools and employers when it comes to curriculum design or the harmonisation of practical training in schools and firms. Notable exceptions, such as the example in Čakovec, should serve as best-practice models of such cooperation. In this case, the school, an international firm and the county branch of the Croatian Employment Service successfully negotiated with the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports to accredit a vocational programme for the occupation of shoemaker.

In a situation where national efforts are focused heavily on the distributive aspects of social inclusion, local communities and all relevant stakeholders could play an important role in tackling its relational and subjective dimensions. As demonstrated in the introduction to this report and the section covering the policy process and debate, youth unemployment in Croatia will probably remain a serious problem in the medium term. This puts people with lower education levels and those trapped in undesirable occupations in a particularly delicate position. With careful planning, local communities could optimally use the capacities of unemployed young people to address many public needs. Such needs could include the renovation of public infrastructure, the protection of the environment or the provision of diversified cultural events. Care must be taken not to isolate these young people from the labour market or displace labour demand. At the same time, this would dovetail with current policy efforts to activate those at risk of long-term unemployment through public works projects. Such carefully designed local approaches could achieve synergies with both national, European and international funding. They could create public services which would permanently remain in the local community, enabling unemployed youth to contribute to the development of their community. Such an engagement could also widen their network of social contacts, which may be of special importance in finding permanent employment. Given the cyclical trends in the Croatian labour market, it is likely that those graduating from three-year vocational schools will remain a group at risk of long-term unemployment and precarious employment. However, with their practical skills and previous exposure to the demands of the practical work, they could be a great asset in such activities. These proposals apply not only to those who have already entered the labour market, but also to those still attending vocational schools. Of course, consideration must be given to issues such as the legal provisions governing the safety of minors or the workload involved in the education process.

³⁰ This point is related to findings elaborated in Section 2.2. It draws primarily on interviews with school staff and focus groups with students, which indicate inequalities in the provision of firm-based training. Some of these examples relate to employers not living up to their part of the contract, failing to provide financial compensation, allocating meaningless work to apprentices, as well as extra hours that are well outside contracted arrangements. The involvement of trade unions in this regard could be important in guaranteeing a certain level of rights to apprentices. It would also allow trade unions to recruit new members early in their working life, making this engagement more interesting to the leadership of trade unions.

³¹ As places in academic tertiary education greatly exceed the number of students in grammar schools and the pressure to obtain a place is increasing in parallel, this track should not be adjusted for population size, and slight expansion might be useful.

4.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL DONOR ORGANISATIONS

Accession to the EU should allow Croatia full access to structural and cohesion funds, opening the door for strategic capital investment in the VET system. However, careful planning is required in order to optimise these funds in terms of both beneficiary access and investment priorities. With regard to the former, policy makers should consider dividing fund provision for VET into several different lots, targeting different beneficiaries. For example, funds for the further development of the Croatian Qualifications Framework or teacher and practice provider training should be directed mostly towards national stakeholders, providing a smaller number of more substantial grants. Investment in school and community infrastructure and equipment should foster local autonomy. This would make funds accessible to all communities which submit logical and feasible plans for developing local VET systems. Two points here merit special attention. Firstly, when it comes to accessing structural and cohesion funds, the capacity for building local partnerships will be a particularly crucial factor. Interviews with school staff conducted as part of this study indicate that even previous Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) financial schemes were usually more complex than most vocational schools could deal with. Secondly, structural and cohesion funds should tackle not only the distributive and material aspects of social inclusion. They should also support innovative, community-based approaches to integrating three-year vocational schools and their students into key social structures and processes. Another precondition to ensure optimal fund utilisation is a comprehensive system of supporting potential beneficiaries (municipalities, counties, civil society organisations and, most importantly, vocational schools) in all phases of the project cycle: from project design to the reporting phase.

In terms of investment priorities, it seems that the European Regional Development Fund could be a beneficial source of investment in two areas: VET infrastructure (school equipment, firm-based training facilities) and supporting institutions that contribute to the overall inclusiveness of VET processes and outcomes. Such institutions could include job clubs run under the auspices of the Croatian Employment Service and youth clubs, youth centres and information centres managed by civil society organisations.

Moreover, the European Social Fund could provide tangible support for the provision of firm-based training. This could incentivise key stakeholders (schools, employers, the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts, potentially the Croatian Chamber of Economy) to make their provision of firm-based training more socially sensitive towards the disadvantaged backgrounds of many students enrolling in three-year vocational programmes. Access to the European Social Fund

could also give rise to a more robust structuring of local employment partnerships. This would provide the necessary framework for permanent dialogue among key stakeholders on further VET development and its linkage to the labour market, accompanied by enhanced career and educational guidance for VET students. The aforementioned infrastructural investments could be financed primarily by the European Regional Development Fund and should encourage a more comprehensive approach to social inclusion and cohesion policy. This could be complemented by locally and regionally targeted European Social Fund provision. Additional Croatian Employment Service staff, youth and community workers could be employed. Among other things, they could provide a more individualised approach to students coming from three-year vocational programmes, reducing the risk of social exclusion and putting their valuable competences to good use.

Finally, Lifelong Learning Programme schemes, primarily Leonardo da Vinci and Comenius (or their counterparts within the future EU financial framework) should not be neglected. Data collected through interviews with school staff indicates that experience of international mobility can boost the self-confidence of three-year VET students. It can also help them to develop key competences, such as foreign language skills (primarily English). The Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes (which administers the Lifelong Learning Programme in Croatia) could do more to share examples of best practice among vocational schools. One possibility would be for the agency to form partnerships with schools that have achieved some success in this regard. Moreover, both schools and donors should go beyond 'counting heads'. Instead, they should aim to make mobility opportunities more equitable, avoiding the temptation to use it exclusively as a reward for the best students or as a means of making the school look good in international activities. Young people who are at the greatest risk of social exclusion seem to be given the least consideration when it comes to mobility programmes. Yet these experiences could be exactly what they need to renew (or develop) enthusiasm for their studies and develop a sense of belonging in their occupation.

4.4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

The role of civil society organisations could be particularly important when it comes to fostering the relational and subjective dimensions of social inclusion, which have been neglected in the Croatian policy framework. Their role could encompass the provision of quality programmes of non-formal education, volunteering and community organising. Once again, the practical skills of students and graduates of three-year vocational programmes could be put to good use. This recommendation goes hand in hand with the further development of youth work, which should gather pace

in parallel with the drafting and adoption of a Youth Act which is expected to be completed by the end of 2013. It also encompasses investment in the necessary infrastructure, such as youth clubs, youth centres and information centres, which may have a role to play in guidance for VET students. Close cooperation between vocational schools and local civil society organisations could give rise to partnerships constituting the pillars of local cultural, social and economic development. All of this could contribute to a sense of community inclusion among students of three-year vocational schools, who, as the local research findings indicate, often face prejudice, scorn and stigmatisation.

Civil society organisations may also provide a possible niche for the employment of three-year VET students.

This may be the case particularly for those who face the greatest barriers in accessing the labour market, such as students graduating in adapted vocational courses. Examples of civil society organisations establishing social cooperatives, such as the autonomous centre in Čakovec and the Humana Nova cooperative, may be an effective way of ensuring that young people who find themselves at a particular risk of social exclusion are well integrated. Those graduating from adapted vocational courses most certainly belong to this group, keeping in mind their highly unfavourable prospects in the labour market. These models, which need to be embedded in a wider national and local policy framework, could serve as a safety net for young people at risk and also as mechanisms for their personal and professional emancipation.

CONCLUSIONS

Taken individually, most of the findings obtained from this exercise in mapping social inclusion and social cohesion practices and challenges in three-year vocational education in Croatia have not proved overtly surprising to the researchers or research board members. However, the comprehensiveness of the picture obtained and the consistency of findings, borne out by a triangulation of methods and viewpoints, have, in our opinion, provided a sound evidence base to act on social inclusion in VET.

Achieving coherent policy making in the current environment might be a rather challenging task in itself. The majority of stakeholders still have a reductive understanding of social inclusion and social cohesion has proved to be an unknown term. To that extent, a basic policy paradigm shift is required. It is necessary to move away from the 'competitive victimisation' of 'special needs groups', and a focus on 'rewarding those deserving merit' towards a more general rights-based approach, based on identifying obstacles to social inclusion (in any of the dimensions) which students face. Once identified, resources ought to be directed to improve students' access to a high-quality education. This should include ample opportunity for mobility, the chance to learn relevant competences, the opportunity to participate in social life and support in transition to the world of work. The forthcoming education strategy might be a good place to depart from the long-standing practice of 'muddling through' and firmly frame inclusive education as a social investment and an individual right.

The majority of challenges identified in this mapping exercise do not seem to emerge from school practices or conflicts between stakeholders. Instead, they arise due to gaps and overlap in the institutional framework. This leads to unenforceable regulations and a lack of resources, support and incentives for three-year VET development. In such an environment, local level stakeholders have had to resort to coping mechanisms which are unsustainable or sub-optimal in the medium term. The situation is exacerbated by the deadlock caused by a scarcity of investment in the three-year VET system (intensified by austerity) and student recruitment challenges due to demographic changes.

In order to overcome the current stalemate, the institutional framework should be tweaked in such a way that it facilitates capacity building in vocational school communities. The coordination of roles in relation to VET between ministries in charge of education, entrepreneurship and crafts and labour ought to be intensified. In addition, high-quality VET attuned to labour market practices requires considerable public investment and commitment. With declining resources allocated for this purpose, it is difficult to create the human and social capital necessary to define the standards

and development perspectives necessary to access EU funding.

Both overlap and, more importantly, gaps ('no one's responsibility') must be addressed at the implementation level. Issues include areas not covered by or poorly coordinated between agencies (Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education, Education and Teacher Training Agency) and chambers (not only the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts, but also the Croatian Chamber of Economy, which has a high stake in a skilled workforce). Involving industry-related trade unions in VET issues might improve industrial relations and the VET system considerably. County-level resources for vocational education are currently rather limited, especially in deprived areas. Nevertheless, counties could be a key arena for VET development and coordination, provided they attract greater support at both national level and from cities and municipalities (which have a strategic interest in having well-organised VET, both for reasons of economic growth and social inclusion). In the final instance, employers and schools have a common interest in close cooperation in development of curriculum and firm-based training and such cooperation ought to be stimulated. EU funding opens a wide window of opportunity at local level in this regard. However, in order not to waste this opportunity, project capacities in school communities should be nurtured, partnerships reinforced and civil society organisations involved.

Social inclusion and mobility opportunities for students ought to be the focus of any effective VET policies. A situation in which the students with the lowest academic achievement make up for the majority of enrolment in the three-year vocational track, and the associated lack of student motivation observed in this study, seriously hinder the prospects of vocational education. Adequate compensation, scholarships, individualised and targeted counselling, as well as the democratisation of the school community might be moderately costly and demand an increase in effort. However, these measures are likely to be a social investment that will be repaid with an improved social profile; students with better learning capabilities; more attractive vocational programmes; and a higher level of social cohesion in the community. Otherwise, the demographic outlook is likely to overshadow the future of craft and industrial vocational education.

If actions are to be efficient in terms of results and targeting, if challenges are to be identified correctly and opportunely, a culture of monitoring student progress and evaluation needs to be reinforced. This ought to reach beyond the school itself by following up on and reaching out to graduates and students who have dropped out. This is particularly important at local level.

With regard to the possibility of generalising the findings and recommendations for the rest of the vocational education system, this exercise has admittedly left several areas underexplored. Such areas include the challenges faced by schools operating in other large vocational fields (e.g. mechanical engineering); issues specific to industrial and trade courses (salesperson,

motor vehicle driver, some construction occupations) where the provision of training is school-based; and the mapping of social inclusion patterns and pathways in four-year technical courses (in particular with respect to labour market integration). These would all merit a more focused approach, which can build upon the initial 'mapmaking' effort presented here.

ANNEX: STATISTICAL DATA

	Year	Croatia	Karlovac	Međimurje	Primorsko-goranska
Population	2011	4 284 889	128 899	113 804	296 195
Population, 15-19	2011	244 177	6 295	6 971	13 792
Upper secondary education entry cohort	2012	49 510	1 290	1 352	2 652
	2016	41 243	1 113	1 299	2 314
GDP (EUR/capita)	2010	10 057	7 404	7 885	12 343
Social assistance coverage (% of population)		2.43	4.83	5.04	0.96
Local expenditure upper secondary (EUR million)	2008	96.2	2.8	3.2	6.3
	2011	71.6	2.6	1.8	4.7
Change in local secondary education expenses (% absolute)	2008–11	-26	-5	-44	-25
Annual local expenditure per student (EUR)		390	558	398	426
Number of schools running craft and industrial programmes		195	8	5	17
Completed craft and industrial vocational	2001	17 708	503	595	1 114
	2011	10 765	331	426	525
Completed upper secondary	2001	50 129	1 348	1 382	3 381
	2011	45 287	1 165	1 228	2 635
Decennial VET decline (%)	2001–11	-39	-34	-28	-53
Share of 3-year VET graduates among total (%)	2011	24	28	35	20
Unemployment rate (% average)	2011	17.0	24.2	14.9	13.4
3-year VET unemployment, 15-19	end of 2008	5 647	172	123	217
	end of 2012	9 829	278	277	327
3-year VET transition to employment, 15-19 (%)	2008	40	42	55	42
	2012	25	30	34	26

ACRONYMS

ASOO	Agencija za strukovno obrazovanje i obrazovanje odraslih (Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education)
CES	Croatian Employment Service (Hrvatski zavod za zapošljavanje)
EU	European Union
EUR	Euro
GDP	Gross domestic product
JMO	Jedinstveni model obrazovanja (integrated educational model)
LFS	Labour Force Survey
UN	United Nations
VET	Vocational education and training
VETIS	Vocational Education and Training Information System

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