

EQUALITY OF ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

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Abstract

The paper presents Croatian educational system focusing on access to higher education as a basic human right. The need for equal access to education of the vulnerable group, children and youth without adequate parental care, is emphasized. Paper explores the opinions of youth without parental care (N = 33) and youth living with their families (N = 111) about further education after high school. Youth opinions about impact of socio-economic background and state provided opportunities for further education were also explored. The results show that youth without adequate parental care are less motivated to continue their further education after high school. At the same time, they evaluate the state care, equity of opportunities for education, as well as the influence of personal effort on success in higher education more positive than their peers living within families. The paper stresses the need for further research in this area.

Keywords: *access to education, equity in education, higher education, human rights, youth without parental care*

INTRODUCTION

Education is the key to social inclusion because education and training enable citizens to make use of existing possibilities for full engagement in social and political life as active citizens. So it is easy to see how education system can be a source of exclusion if it fails adequately to educate a portion of its students (Otero and McCoshan, 2005).

OECD (2007) states that a general equity objective in tertiary education is to achieve a student population that closely reflects the composition of society as a whole. But equity of access to higher education is still not a reality for all social groups. One of the most vulnerable social groups is children and youth in foster care or institutional care (without appropriate parental care). Martin (2009) found that 70% of the youth in foster care showed desire and motivation for tertiary education while estimates suggest that only 7 to 13 percent of students from foster care enroll in higher education. Pecora et. al (2005) in the report for the Casey Family Program found only about 2 percent of young people from foster care

obtained bachelor's degrees, in contrast to 24 percent of adults in the general adult population in the USA.

Education (meaning all levels of education) is seen as public good and as a public good it is one that all members of society can enjoy (Bergan, 2005) thus, making it a public responsibility as well. This means that it is the responsibility of the state to ensure equal access to education to these children and youth. But the question is: Does the state have relevant funds and mechanisms to ensure tertiary education (Farnell, 2008)?

Educational system in the Republic of Croatia has 4 levels: preschool education, primary education, secondary and tertiary education. Primary school lasts for 8 years, and secondary education lasts 3 -4 years. After finalizing secondary education that lasts 4 years (either vocational or general education) students can enroll in university or other tertiary education institutions (MZOS, 2013). Tertiary education is organized and governed by national legislation (*Zakon o znanstvenoj djelatnosti i visokom obrazovanju, 2011*). According to the national statistics and data on population in 2001 when compared to most countries in the EU Croatia was lagging behind. Only 11,9% (Državni zavod za statistiku, 2013) of the population obtained higher education. Mili evi & Dolenc (2009) state that the overall percentage of the population with higher education qualifications in the EU is more than 20%.

Due to the importance that education plays in the life of each individual and the added value that educational level gives to society as a whole it is important that all social groups have equal access to tertiary education. The paper explores the topic of equity of access to tertiary education of children and youth in foster and institutional care.

THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION

The right to education is fundamental and one that is included in the European Convention on Human Rights - article 26. (1948). As such it is recognized in International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) article 13. (1966) Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), European. Convention on Human. Rights, article 28. (1950), in the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960), in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006), as well as in the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, article 56. (2011). All the documents above state that compulsory education has to be free, secondary education at least accessible to all and higher and tertiary education accessible to "all who are able and willing to participate successfully in higher education should have fair and equal opportunities to do so" (Council of Europe 1998: 2.1).

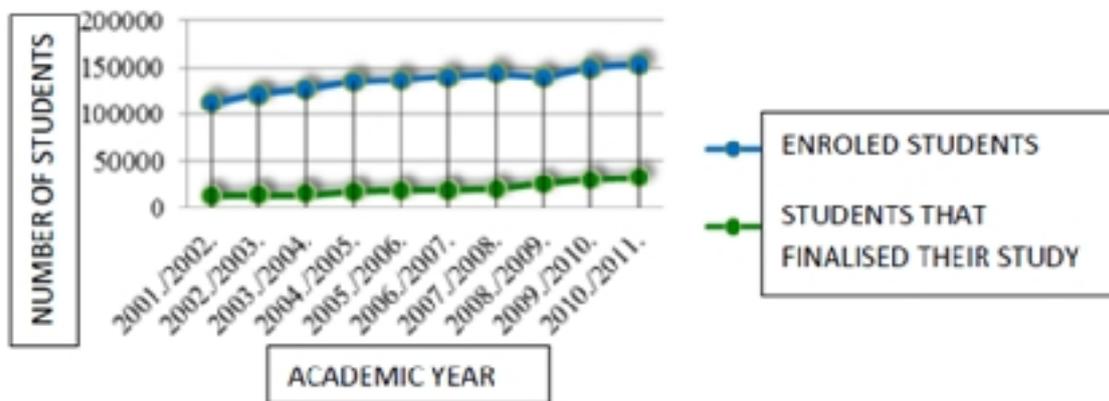
Although the norms propose equal access to education, this basic human right is not being met on a daily bases, due to a number of obstacles that lead to uneven access to education.

If we analyze the right to tertiary education according to 4A (Tomaševski, 2001), we should focus on the following: *availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability*. *Availability* – education should be free and government funded with adequate infrastructure and teachers; *accessibility* – educational system should not discriminate and positive steps should be taken to reach the most marginalized; *acceptability* - the content of education should be relevant, culturally appropriate and *adaptability* - education should respond to changing needs of society and to different contexts. Just by having a brief look at these elements we can see that tertiary education in the Republic of Croatia is not available to all. Due to the distribution of tertiary education institutions that tend to be centered in big cities, without adequate financial support from the state, it is more difficult for students from different counties to migrate or live in the cities were the tertiary institutions are located. According to available data we can determine that there is an uneven access to education due to the indirect discrimination

caused by different socio-economic factors (Farnell, 2009). When analyzing standards and acceptability of education it is easy to see that often these standards are not met. eg. (Ve eri , 2012). Although there have been some activities that focused on adaptability of tertiary education, it still does not respond to its requirements.

Even though the number of students that have enrolled tertiary education has grown in the last few years, the number of students finalizing the year of their study is still not sufficient (Graph 1). Data from United Nations Development Programme-a (UNDP) *Obrazovne i radne karijere mladih* (2008) confirms that 42% of youth enrolling in tertiary education does not conclude their studies.

The same research on population of youth in institutional and foster care found that only 30% of the population enrolled in tertiary education. Out of this number 66% of them did not finish their studies at the time of the research (UNDP, 2009).



Graph 1: Number of students that enrolled and finalized their studies from 2001./2002. do 2010./2011. according to National statistic Centre

CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN INSTITUTIONAL CARE AND THE RIGHT TO TERTIARY EDUCATION

Children and youth without adequate parental care are the children and youth that have been taken out of their families and put into foster and institutional care. If a child has been moved from his/her home for their own benefit it has a right to special legal and state care. Parties shall in accordance with their national laws ensure alternative care for such a child (UN, 1989, article 20). According to article 149. of the *Obiteljskog zakona* (2011) foster care is a form of protection of the minors without parental care, adults that are not capable to care for themselves and other persons not able to protect their rights and interests. Although state has a right to remove a child from an inadequate family care it is important to know that often these situations result with new difficulties and trauma for a child (Sladovi , Franz and Mujkanovi , 2003).

Sometimes children and youth leave institutional care. From there some children are adopted, some leave to foster care, some are able to return to their families and some stay until the age of 18 (when they are legally adults in the Republic of Croatia). According to the data available in the year 2011 there were 825 beneficiaries of institutional care (in private or public institutions): this number includes all forms of care: weekly, monthly and daily

accommodation. The data shows that there are 586 youth and children in full time institutional care (Ministarstvo socijalne politike i mladih, 2012).

The question that arises from these facts is: What happens to these young people when they turn 18? Where do these children go?

In some case they stay in child care if they are still attending secondary schools, some leave to communities where they are given some form of support. Although some of the children show motivation for further education, often they are limited in their choice due to the lack of education counseling or enrolling in vocational education (low skills), which does not offer further education after finalizing secondary schools.

RESEARCH

During the year 2012 the research was conducted on the sample of 144 youth. Sample consisted of youth in institutional care (N = 33) and youth in family care (N = 111). All of the examinees in the sample were high school students. Youth from institutional care were accomodated in: *Dje ji dom Ivan Goran Kova i* , Zagreb, *Ku e sv. Josipa*, Hrvatski Leskovec, *Ku e Emaus* in Zagreb.

The aim of the research was to determine the opinions of youth about accessibility of tertiary education in the Republic of Croatia with the special emphasis on youth in institutional care.

Instrument

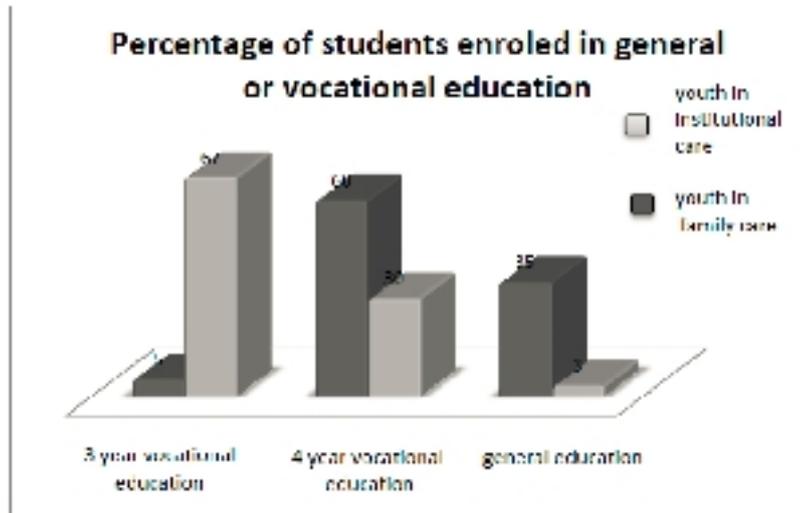
For the purpose of the research a questionnaire was constructed. In the first part of the questionnaire examinees gave personal data (gender, age, high school and grade the students attend). Second part of the instrument consisted of a Likert type scale (1 = I totally disagree and 5 = I totally agree) questionnaire. In the last part of the questionnaire the examinees were asked to answer 2 open ended questions. For the students in institutional care paper copies of the questionnaires were prepared, the rest of the sample (youth living with their families) filled in online survey (available online from June 25th 2012. until September 21st). Collected data was analyzed by SPSS, with the use of non-parametric statistic.

Results and interpretation:

The results of collected data analyzed show that both students in foster care as well as students living with their families show motivation for tertiary (M = 4,2 and M = 4,6). Both youth in parental care as well as institutional care feel that they have support in their environment to continue their education (M = 4,2 and M = 4,5). At the same time, the students evaluated the state care and support for further education (M = 3,1 and M = 2,2) a bit lower.

Analysis of an overall sample showed that more youth and children in institutional care (67%) attended 3 yearlong vocational institutions for secondary education which makes it almost impossible for them to continue to tertiary education (Graph. 2). This is easily concluded due to the fact that main pre-requirement for enrolling and entering tertiary education is for a student to conclude 4 yearlong secondary education (general or vocational program). In such a way these youth in institutional care are discriminated from the start of their secondary education. There can be many reasons for these results, but the most obvious one is that the state tries to enable these children with their first qualifications and enable them to compete in the labor market.

Graph 2: Percentage of students enrolled in general or vocational education



The results were further analyzed according to type of care (parental or institutional). Mann Whitney U test was conducted to explore the difference between the opinions of youth according to the type of care they are in. The results show that the significant statistical difference exists in following statements: *I am motivated to continue my education; I think that the state cares adequately about my possibilities for further education; I think that youth from all socio-economic backgrounds have the same access to tertiary education; I think that the success in university depends only on my personal effort.* Table 1. shows mean ranks of examinees' answers.

Table 1: Mean ranks of youth opinions on statements about education

	Type of care	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
I am motivated to continue my education.	Institutional care	33	59,13636	1951,5
	Family care	111	76,47297	8488,5
I think that the state cares adequately about my possibilities for further education.	Institutional care	33	93,95455	3100,5
	Family care	111	66,12162	7339,5
I think that youth from all socio-economic backgrounds have the same access to tertiary education.	Institutional care	33	89,80303	2963,5
	Family care	111	67,35586	7476,5
I think that the success in university depends only on my personal effort.	Institutional care	33	87,71212	2894,5
	Family care	111	67,97748	7545,5

The results show that youth in institutional care has more positive opinions about state care, equal access and personal responsibility for academic success. These results can be interpreted with life experiences of youth in institutional care. Since the state caters for their needs (lack of parental care) it was expected that they show higher satisfaction on the matter. Also, at the time of this research there was a big media campaign *Korak u život* informing and sensitizing the public about the issues of youth in institutional and foster care. This program ensured 87 scholarships for children that wanted to continue their education (*Korak u život*, 2013). The condition for receiving scholarship is academic success. Often, these scholarships do not meet the monthly costs, so students have to work and study at the same time, making it difficult for them to obtain academic excellence.

As these young people are very independent and have learned to care for themselves the results that emphasize individual responsibility was expected. But, we have to keep in mind that an increased emphasis on individual responsibility can both promote and conceal restricted access to welfare spending for traditional beneficiaries (Pintelon et al., 2013).

Table 2: Mann Whitney U test of youth statements about education

	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
I am motivated to continue my education.	1390,5	1951,5	-2,686	0,007
I think that the state cares about my possibilities for further education.	1123,5	7339,5	-3,504	0
I think that youth from all socio-economic backgrounds have the same access to tertiary education.	1260,5	7476,5	-2,796	0,005
I think that the success in university depends only on my personal effort.	1329,5	7545,5	-2,543	0,011

On the other hand, the students in parental care have higher motivation for tertiary education, but seem to have more negative opinions about statements that evaluate the state support and personal responsibility for academic success. Farnell (2009, 4) states that the policy of scholarships that depends solely on academic excellence will lead to students from better socio-economic background that receive them even if all citizens pay for them through taxes, thus further discriminating students. Pintelon et al., (2013, 55) claim that social class is definitely not dead and that a decline of its relevance (to social exclusion) has yet to be proven.

When further analysis was made differences were found in motivation for further education in the sample of institutionalized youth according to their gender (Table 3).

Table 3: Mean ranks of student opinions about motivation for further education and state care according to gender

	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
I am motivated to continue my education.	Female	17	13,56	230,5
	Male	16	20,66	330,5
I think that the state cares adequately about my possibilities for further education.	Female	17	13,56	230,5
	Male	16	20,66	330,5

Statistically significant differences according to gender were found in youth opinions about their motivation and state care. It seems that females in institutional care show more positive opinions about tertiary education and state care.

Table 4. Mann-Whitney U test of institutionalized youth according to gender

	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
I am motivated to continue my education.	77,5	230,5	-2,325	0,02
I think that the state cares adequately about my possibilities for further education.	77,5	230,5	-2,154	0,031

Gender issues in education equity have been present for a long time and even when female students participate in education they tend to be overrepresented in those disciplines lead to low-paying occupations and underrepresentation in leadership roles (WB, 2009). Still, it is interesting to see that female students show high motivation for continuing tertiary education.

CONCLUSION

There are great private and public benefits from access to and participation in tertiary education, from better opportunities for employment as well as the overall better quality of life. This is why it is important for all students that are motivated and willing to enroll tertiary education to be given the chance to do so. OECD (2007) claims that for a tertiary system to be called equitable it needs to ensure that access to, participation in and outcomes of tertiary education are based only on individuals' innate ability and study effort. They ensure that educational potential at tertiary level is not the result of personal and social circumstances, including of factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, ethnic origin, immigrant status, place of residence, age, or disability. World Bank states that after examination of existing equity policy in Eastern Europe and Central Asia – ECA countries, equity as an issue is floating on the policy level (WB, 2009, 26) and finds the quality of secondary education (access to free, quality in rural areas as well as when coming from low income families) as one of the main issues. Also, the report found that there is a significant relationship between SES (socio-economic status) of families of students and their access to and participation in tertiary education. In her research on the financial aspects of student course choices and study experiences in a Croatian higher education setting Doolan (2010) found that institutional practices, such as admission procedures and faculty equipment, as well as the time required for the course, contribute to the gravity of the economic discrepancies. Also, reliance on parents for financial support, lack of student loan possibilities and insufficient scholarships are identified as unfavorable factors when discussing access to tertiary education. Schoon, Martin and Ross (2006) find that parents from privileged social backgrounds have higher aspirations for their child than less privileged parents.

But what happens to the aspirations of the children living without parental care? *What happens to youth in institutional care that are motivated to continue their education and enroll in tertiary education?*

The research conducted gave a small insight in the opinions of youth and children in institutional care as well as in family care about tertiary education. The results show that children in institutional care are highly motivated to continue their education, but have fewer opportunities to do so because of the quality of their secondary education. The results clearly show that the right equity in tertiary education to these vulnerable groups is not being met.

Secondly, the research has shown that these children show high level of trust in the state and institutional support in their education as well as in personal responsibility for academic success.

What can be done to justify this trust and ensure equality in tertiary education?

To enable a larger number of youth access to tertiary education Mili evi & Dolenc (2009) suggest the following forms of state support: funding and subventions for meals, subventions for accommodation and scholarships. Also, Otero, & McCoshan, (2005) claim that targeted funding for poorer students, coupled with expenditure on other items may be more efficient expenditure to increase participation rates. The state effort to ensuring equity in access to tertiary education can be seen in allowing and funding of the 4th grade of secondary education, as well as in ensuring a number of scholarships for successful students. Still, more needs to be done. Certainly further research on the opinions of these youth and children on

the issues they encounter and the possibilities to deal with them successfully. A longitudinal study of institutional youth would give more insight to personal and public benefits of equal access to tertiary education.

In the time when states do their best to develop as knowledge based societies equipped with high skilled labor to ensure economic and social welfare it is of most importance to make sure that vulnerable groups in the society have equal access to quality tertiary education. By ensuring this basic human right we can ensure better future for all.

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