

# **INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EDUCATION**

## **Changing Croatian education system as a part of stabilisation and association process**

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### **FINAL CONCLUSIONS**

**by**

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The aims of this conference were to discuss the changes in the Croatian education system, to exchange experiences in the field of education reforms, and to encourage the new possibilities of international development co-operation in Croatia. Moreover, the conference was created as a platform for the broader discussion among Croatian experts concerning the themes of the conference and international education standards.

These discussions and other co-operation that took place in the conference were guided by two key publications: OECD Thematic Review of National Policies for Education of South Eastern Europe, and Stocktaking Research on Policies for Education for Democratic Citizenship in South Eastern Europe prepared by Council of Europe. Participants of the conference were encouraged to attend with their own contributions and choose the appropriate forum for presenting them among the Working Groups on both days.

#### **Executive summary**

The overall topic of the conference was divided into six sub-themes. These were 1) curriculum development; 2) teacher education and training; 3) monitoring and assessment; 4) education for democratic citizenship; 5) higher education; and 6) partnerships in VET reform. Presentations and discussions were organised into three parallel working groups each day. Each of these sub-themes lies in the heart of education reform in the region. Therefore, it is paramount that even if it necessary to analyse and study each sub-topic separately, the inter-connectedness of the various elements of education reform is clearly emphasised. One of the positive aspects of this conference was the dialogue across the sub-themes of education. As a sign of that boundary crossing interaction was the presence and contributions of the two Ministries. It is of utmost importance that this professional and political dialogue will deepen and become more like a routine part of education reform in Croatia.

As the Working Group 1 pointed out, curriculum development is an integral part of any systemic education reform. As an outcome of discussion in this conference it became evident that there are not international curriculum models or practices that could be transferred to Croatia and implemented in schools. Nor are there any European standards for curriculum, teaching or learning that could be adopted. Perhaps the most important thing to do as part of education reform here in Croatia could be the clarification of the conceptual framework of curriculum. Related questions are “What is included in the curriculum?”, “Who are involved in designing it?”, and “What is the role of curriculum in quality assurance system?”.

Assessment and monitoring of pupils’ achievement and performance of schools is becoming a global trend. One of the reasons for increased need for monitoring and assessment in education is shifting of power to the local players, especially to schools themselves. Although educational assessment is an international movement today, there are no clear standards of how it should be integrated as a part of education system. European countries have varying policies and different practices in monitoring education and assessing pupils’ learning. Working Group 2 came up to a conclusion that while there is a consensus of necessity of monitoring performance and assessing learning, both terminology and methodology create confusion and debate. As pointed out by Dr. Bakker, there are also several misunderstandings among evaluation experts and decision-makers about monitoring and assessment in education. It is therefore advisable that Croatian experts pay close attention and invest resources in exploring different models of monitoring and assessment of education before establishing institutional and political structures.

Teacher education and training is one of the critical parts of education reforms especially in this region. It is obvious that teachers are not able to renew their thinking on learning and adopt active learning methods in their classrooms without adequate initial teacher education and sufficient (in terms of quantity and quality) in-service training. It is therefore advisable that teacher education will be considered as part of university education as proposed by both ministers Strugar and Kraljevic. Moreover, teacher pre-service and in-service education should be seen as elements of lifelong professional development of teachers rather than separate functions organised without proper co-ordination. It is also necessary to solve the questions of who is responsible for in-service training of teachers and how to achieve wider recognition of those in-service training services that non-governmental organisation provide.

Education for democratic citizenship is regarded as one change force of education in the region. It was noted in this conference that EDC is mainly a policy issue rather than pedagogic or methodological issue. Just like teaching and learning in general have various forms and contents in Europe, also EDC has and will continue to have different approaches and applications not only in different education systems but also within these systems.

Higher education in Croatia has for some time already been involved in international and especially European level dialogue of harmonising and unifying some of the functions. The Bologna process and Sorbonne Declaration among other international ideas have been under debate. It was pointed out by Dr. Polsek that it is difficult to fulfil the international requirements unless local problems of higher education are somehow settled. This requires open dialogue within the institutions themselves but

also with students and the society in general. Continuing the higher education evaluation processes may produce valuable information and new insights if done by using independent examiners and international networks of quality assurance.

Vocational education has been under intensive reforms during the past ten years in the region. Not only have the contents and methods of vocational education and training changed but also its role vis-à-vis social partners, especially employers, trade unions and other sub-sectors of education. One great challenge that is common to many European countries is establishment of these partnerships as an integral part of vocational education of young professionals. Again, some of the limiting factors of creation of partnerships are commonly held misbeliefs of what vocational education is, and lack of relevant forums for professional dialogues. It is important that vocational education and training will be integrated as part of overall policy of education and not seen as separate strand that has its own policy, intentions and actors.

As a conclusion of the work carried out in the Working Groups and the discussions in the plenary sessions the following issues were raised:

**There are no European standards in education** other than jointly prepared and agreed declarations, conventions and programmes. For example, it is not useful to rely on the idea of European standards in curriculum, monitoring and assessment, teacher education, or organisation of teaching and learning in schools. The pedagogic freedom of teachers to choose the appropriate methods of teaching is highly respected in all education systems across Europe.

However, **there are some common principles in public education** that could be used as a framework for developing education policies in Croatia. One such area is primary education. Nine year comprehensive primary education is a normal arrangement in Europe. Some countries are moving towards ten-year comprehensive/compulsory education and 12 years of pre-university education is made available for the majority of age cohort in several systems. It is therefore understandable that while adapting to the European education systems, and reaching out to meet the international standards of pupil achievement Croatia also makes nine years compulsory general education available for all children. However, the structure of this nine-year primary schooling needs careful analysis. As a system of dispersed school network with a number of small schools, traditional division to six-year primary and three-year lower secondary school will probably create difficult problems in these remote, less-populated areas of the country.

**Responsibility of training teachers needs more attention.** Organising initial teacher education in the university faculties is a good idea given the requirements that Croatian teachers face in their work today and in the future. Sufficient pedagogic education should be made compulsory for all teachers aiming to teach in primary or general secondary schools. It is, furthermore, necessary that training of vocational school teachers will be properly resourced and organised in appropriate intuitions. In-service training of teachers is not clearly organised in terms of who is in charge of it and what training courses brings benefits to teachers. One opportunity to solve this confusing situation is to move the responsibility of in-service training of teachers to the municipalities (employers) and make the government's financial resources

available for open tendering. It is important that the quality of in-service training determines who provides it.

This conference showed that **there needs to be more dialogue between the universities and other sectors of education**, as well as between the two ministries in charge of education. One of the valuable outcomes of this conference is that these dialogues proceeded and added new dimensions. There is always a danger in education reforms that various sub-sectors are developed in isolation from the others and they begin to live their own lives with their own aims and visions. Therefore, the forum like this conference where the Croatian educators discuss the education reform with external colleagues serves well the purposes of crossing boundaries between different sub-sectors, different administrative organs and individuals sharing the same intentions.

### **Final conclusion**

Croatian education system is going through a system reform. One fundamental element of that reform is decentralising the educational administration and management from the central agencies to regional and local actors. It is also evident that this reform is not just one time project that will be finished in a given time. Indeed, this education reform is typically a large-scale change of education that requires much more professional knowledge and skills to be understood and managed properly than any previous single-innovation change that have been experienced.

Reforming education systems has become a discipline within social sciences and education. In the education systems where this has been realised, considerable amount of resources and political attention have been given to establish necessary professional capacity within the system to advice and guide the change processes. It is simply a cross underestimation to assume that expertise of educational change grows through long experience in education whether in schools, universities or in administration. School effectiveness, school improvement and school change have become recognised cross-disciplinary fields in education with their typical methodologies, research traditions and scientific communities.

Shift from central control to local management and accountability is creating new needs that are more elementary and important than first meets the eye. Decentralisation is not simply a technical process of reorganising old functions in a new way. As a final conclusion, three emerging needs as part of education reform in Croatia are the following:

**New forms of collaboration.** Communication and co-operation are the key behaviours of any change, learning or reform. For the purposes of Croatian education reform, however, we need to be more precise who are the key players and how should collaboration be arranged. One possible window to approach this collaboration is the concept of *innovation system* within education sector. Education reforms need innovations from both outside and inside the system. Without totally new ideas the reforms will probably fail. Innovation system in education means an inter-connected network of 1) education policy makers, 2) researchers and scientists, 3) innovators and developers, and 4) the teachers. Many education reforms focus on each of these in a way but leave the inter-connectedness of these entities without attention. The

innovation system in education works only if there is productive interaction and respective forums for all these four elements to exchange opinions, share ideas and construct common meanings and visions for development. Hence, in order to promote the development of internal innovation system within the education system, mechanisms for new forms of collaboration, communication and interaction are needed.

**Comprehensive co-ordination.** According to our daily experiences co-ordination does not mean very much. In its weakest meaning co-ordination is sharing information and informing others about what is going to happen or even worse, what just happened. Systemic education reform means that several elements of education system are changing at the same time. Therefore, co-ordination is a crucial element in securing that the reform progress in coherence and that cost-effectiveness of different operations is maximised. One needs to accept that co-ordination is a skill that requires highly experienced professionals in order to be performed according to standards. Furthermore, co-ordination also needs to be properly financed and resourced. Co-ordinators main function is to move across the boundaries and make sure that all stakeholders are properly involved in reform procedures.

**Redefinition of available resources.** Most education reforms take place with limited resources. If considerable increase of financing the ongoing reform is the condition for successful actions, there are only a few things to be done. Expanding administrative decision-making environment at the local level and increased power to influence what happens in schools is bringing in new possibilities also to identify resources for various aspects of education reform. One of these new resources is the human capital that during the era of central, top-down governance was not properly in use. There are examples of large-scale education reforms where these new emerging human resources have played an important role in achieving the set goals of changes. It is, hence, advisable that while the new culture of local management flourishes in Croatian schools, and when teachers are beginning to experience their new roles as planners and decision-makers concerning their schools, redefinition of available resources becomes a part of education reform.