

# Problems Related to Fake Diplomas in the Higher Education System of Croatia

*An Interview with Jasmina Havranek, PhD, Director of the Agency for Science and Higher Education*

*Interview Conducted by Jadranka Polović for 7dnevno, Published on July 2, 2019*

(Translated from Croatian)



**We should open up to the world, send our students abroad to gain knowledge, but also create conditions for them to return!**

**The importance of understanding the complexity of higher education policies arises from the fact that science and education are becoming increasingly recognized as vital sources of innovation, skills, economic prosperity and personal well-being in today's globalized world. All global players, including the European Union, devote special attention to education, as it is an effective (foreign) policy tool, a source of *soft power* used by these players to broaden their own value system, as well as their geopolitical power.**

While many aspects of higher education systems are limited by the powers of states, it is evident that contemporary globalization is dramatically changing national education

models through the international mobility of students, scientists, programmes and institutions. The number of states holding a view that education is the best way to promote their national interests is increasing, which fuels healthy competition among different value systems and models of socio-economic development. The Western powers have always been aware of the importance of education (providing educational opportunities to foreign students is one of their most important soft-power tools), but developing countries also increasingly want to adopt an innovative economic model and pay special attention to the modernization and internationalization of their national educational systems.

Only a well-developed education system, integrated into an international educational and scientific area, provides a strong competitive edge to a country. On the other hand, their degradation leads to the damage of the reputation and influence of a country in the international community. The education system is one of the most vital spheres of political life, and its effectiveness can only be estimated in the long run. Making this a powerful foreign policy "tool" certainly requires a lot of patience and hard work, not only from scientists and universities but also the governments and numerous state bodies responsible for shaping education policies.

We have discussed the issues of transition, modernization and internationalization of the Croatian education system with the long-time director of the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE), Prof. Jasmina Havranek, PhD.

***Question: You have held an extremely important function, that of ASHE director, for more than a decade. What is the role of ASHE and to what extent have the Agency's activities over the past years changed the system of higher education and science in Croatia? Croatia started with the harmonization of the higher education system with the Bologna Declaration as early as 2005. However, numerous structural problems faced by Croatian universities called for the development of a new model of the quality assurance system.***

First and foremost, one should understand that the higher education systems and institutions are nowadays more exposed to changes than ever. The higher education sector is experiencing fast expansion, the institutions and study programmes are becoming increasingly diverse, so the quality of institutions and their study programmes is more subject to reassessment. Quality assurance is, therefore, a logical answer to that situation, as it plays a key role in the support to higher education systems and higher education institutions in adjusting to these changes, by also ensuring that student qualifications and their study experience remain priorities in institutional missions.

The Bologna Process implies the reform of higher education throughout Europe and in Croatia, and the enhancement of the quality and competitiveness of European higher education lies at the heart of that reform. The establishment of the Agency for Science and Higher Education began in 2005, as an expression of the recognition of the importance of quality assurance, in line with European good practice.

The success of implementation of the Bologna reform is a point of disagreement in Croatia, but we are successful in the segment of establishing a functional quality assurance system. The state of affairs, i.e., achievements, challenges and opportunities,

were discussed at the Ministerial Conference of the European Higher Education Area held in May last year. The conclusion was reached that in the last twenty years the progress has been made in, among other things, quality assurance processes and the implementation of the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*.

In that period, the Agency carried out the first cycle of re-accreditation of higher education institutions. This was the first time all higher education institutions in Croatia were evaluated according to a single methodology and criteria, in cooperation with other stakeholders in science and higher education. Numerous foreign and Croatian experts were involved in the procedures. There were a total of 1400 experts involved in all evaluation procedures, which do not only include re-accreditation.

The first re-accreditation cycle resulted in a lot of useful recommendations issued to all higher education institutions, based on which the institutions are required to develop action plans and devise specific actions to improve their quality. In that respect, re-accreditation is a useful reform tool because it introduces step-by-step changes to the system. Higher education institutions have also recognized the benefits from such an approach. While they were cautious at first, we have succeeded in building a good partnership to be able to continually work and change things for the better.

***Question: The European education system strives to establish common standards for quality assurance. It is a complex process influenced by national policies and EU demands. Could you explain what are the target standards in the European education system to which Croatia is trying to adapt?***

*European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* provide a model for higher education institutions and agencies on how to ensure the quality of higher education in Europe, as implementation of reforms in the European Higher Education Area. The ESG were revised in 2015 in order to incorporate novelties in higher education that include an increasing number of students, “atypical” students (by age and prior education), new types of higher education institutions and study programmes.

Evaluation procedures carried by ASHE are aligned with the ESG, which was confirmed by the international review of the Agency carried out by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). Therefore, besides complying with the national legislation, the Agency has incorporated European guidelines into our standards and accreditation model.

***Question: In Croatia as well as in other members of the European Union, investing in science and higher education is considered to be a fundamental precondition of society's sustainable development. Investing in the human capital, i.e., education, is a favourite topic among Croatian political elites, despite the fact that Croatia has been continually reducing the portion of the budget allocated for science and higher education in the previous decades. Let me ask you a more specific question: Can***

***Croatian students find employment in their profession in the European and the global labour market, and are Croatian qualifications recognized abroad?***

Croatia is part of the European Higher Education Area and the qualifications issued by Croatian higher education institutions (HEIs) are recognized abroad. Accreditation is a confirmation of the authenticity of qualifications. Higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia were accredited by the Agency for Science and Higher Education, which also underwent an international review. Namely, ASHE undergoes a demanding external review process once in five years to qualify for membership in the European umbrella organizations for quality assurance – the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). This is a proof of the alignment of its processes with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*.

The recognition of foreign higher education qualifications for employment purposes is under the competences of the network of European Network of Information Centres/National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union (ENIC/NARIC). Any person who has completed an accredited study in Croatia can contact a national information office or an embassy abroad regarding the recognition of qualifications. Likewise, those who have completed a study abroad should contact the Croatian ENIC/NARIC Office at the Agency for Science and Higher Education for the recognition of higher education qualifications to find employment in Croatia.

***Question: In recent years, especially after Croatia's accession to the EU, students have gained the opportunity to study abroad and the student mobility trend has seen a constant increase. Education has become a powerful geopolitical weapon, part of the soft-power strategy of the EU. The internationalization of higher education has strongly influenced student and teacher mobility in Croatia. What does it really entail?***

The internationalization trend is present in all segments of society and therefore also in higher education. At its essence, this trend is not the goal but a means for the improvement of the quality of higher education – through knowledge transfer, international research projects, student and teacher mobility, etc.

Your observation about education being a powerful geopolitical weapon, part of the soft-power of national strategies, is very interesting. China is perhaps the best example of this - the Chinese have in the recent years invested billions in their top 100 universities, scholarships programmes and support programmes for research centres in China and Asia, so it is not surprising that higher education plays a very important part in the multi-billion-dollar "Belt and Road Initiative." One third of the 1.1 million international students in the United States are coming from China – similar percentages are also in Australia (38 percent) and the United Kingdom (41 percent of students outside the European Union). Not only does China have the largest number of students in the world, but it is also the largest exporter of students. I will also mention the Chinese advancements in the field of biotechnology – this has not happened without a reason.

Over the past 20 years China has invested heavily in natural sciences. This is all part of a broader, well-thought-out strategy.

The recent U-Multirank data, a university ranking supported by the European Commission, also shows that the universities that are open to international cooperation and to colleagues from abroad score far better than those with low international exchange in the areas of knowledge transfer, research and education. They are also more successful in transfer of knowledge to industry; such institutions have 39 percent more joint publications with partners from industry and establish 80 percent more spin-off companies. Globally oriented institutions are 2.5 times more likely to patent their ideas, and their research has greater outreach. In addition, the students of universities that foster openness are more satisfied with their overall student experience. These universities also have a higher percentage of foreign students and teachers, as well as a higher percentage of foreign doctoral candidates and more international joint publications.

***Question: The problems in Croatia are equal to the problems in all other European periphery countries – the massive "production" of an educated working force for more developed and richer societies of Western Europe and the United States. The implementation of the Bologna process, and various student exchange programmes facilitated this process. Because of rising emigration, Croatia is facing not only the "brain drain" but also a decrease of the number of students at Croatian universities. I can see that ASHE is focusing on this issue, as you have recently organized a workshop "Attracting Students from Abroad" at the Faculty of Economics and Business in Zagreb.***

I would not say that the implementation of the Bologna process and student mobility programmes serve to send our students abroad forever. The idea behind Bologna was to create a common European area of higher education, to strengthen the European dimension and to improve quality and competitiveness. Teacher and student mobility, as well as other aspects of internationalization, are of paramount importance for the quality of education. For example, in the United States, international students contributed as much as \$39 billion to the U.S. economy, and practically saved many higher education institutions that were severely affected by the recession.

We need to open up to the world, send our students abroad to gain skills and knowledge, but at the same time create such conditions that they are willing to return. This requires a dedicated effort at all levels – political, academic, economic.

The Agency launched a series of workshops on internationalization in order to raise awareness of the importance of these processes and benefits they carry for higher education institutions, national economy and society as a whole. The first workshop was dedicated to attracting international students, and we focused on the experiences of our institutions, their main challenges: how to design study programmes for foreign students, how to motivate teachers to deliver courses in a foreign language, what are the mechanisms of promotion and the effects on the economy.

The brain drain is a global, not just local phenomenon. I recently heard an anecdote where an Irishman asked a Croat why he came to Ireland when there is nothing in Ireland, and all the Irish people are fleeing to Canada. The world has become a global village; everyone is looking for their place under the sun and the life standard they think they deserve. This is the reality and we have to accept it.

***Question: The rising costs of education and the trend of converting knowledge to commodity are followed by (at least in Croatia) a fall in the real value of a diploma in the labour market. Once they start looking for a stable job, graduates find out that their degrees are worth little to nothing, which can definitely reinforce their feeling of hopelessness and disappointment. The Croatian business community often blames the inadequate system of education, which – in their opinion – does not consider the labour market needs, and continues to educate young people for the jobs that are mostly not needed. Nevertheless, there are more and more graduates in Croatia (even those who finished faculties of natural and technical sciences, and, moreover, even PhDs) who cannot find jobs since there are no jobs available. If we take into account the indisputable modern education paradigm that insists on STEM, the question arises as to how this is possible? What are the professions that Croatian employers look for?***

According to the Croatian Employment Service, at the level of university studies there is a need for professionals in the field of technical sciences (computer science, electrical and mechanical engineering), natural sciences (mathematics and physics), biomedicine and health (medicine and pharmacy), social sciences (logopedics and rehabilitation) and the field of humanities (English language).

As far as unemployment is concerned, at the end of May of this year, the Croatian Employment Service registered slightly more than 10,000 unemployed persons with a university graduate degree, MSc or PhD, of which one portion (about 700) is from the STEM field.

As we know, the enrolment quotas are determined by higher education institutions. This problem comes to focus every year before the enrolments, and is a part of a wider issue regarding the relationship between the sectors of education and economy. While not all quotas are filled, the fact remains that it is necessary to better align them with the real labour market needs, which is also one of the recommendations in the first cycle of re-accreditation. On the other hand, if you look at what professions are in demand at this moment, I wonder if we have a defined labour market, but also a strategy of future needs.

It is important to reach an agreement at the national level of what study programmes we need and want to encourage, and to clearly define what steps need to be taken by the stakeholders. A constructive dialogue is needed with the employers, who need to identify what they consider as limiting factors.

***Question: However, the labour market in the 21st century requires a technologically literate and competent workforce, able to create and innovate.***

***Investment in higher education has the greatest importance, since higher education institutions not only contribute to the technological transformation of society, but also its social and cultural identity. Higher education institutions all over the world collaborate with industry and the economy, and stimulate innovation and creativity, but also discussions about democracy. There is talk of societal prosperity being a "product" of the system of science.***

It does feel like we are living in times of radical change, where traditional factors of success no longer apply. Close integration of research, education and innovation is imperative today; universities are encouraged to collaborate with innovative companies and independent research groups by forming various strategic partnerships. The European Union plays a major role in financing, regulating or supporting innovation ecosystems, working toward removing obstacles to innovation at national, regional and EU levels. If you look at the Horizon Europe, proposed by the EC in June 2018 as part of the long-term EU budget for 2021-2027, you can see that it is a most ambitious programme for research and innovation so far.

Higher education certainly plays a major role in the development of society, but one should not forget that the university is an autonomous institution at the heart of society, and that university research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of any political authority or economic power.

***Question: According to the latest reports published by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) International Quality Group, corruption in higher education is a global phenomenon. What is the situation in Croatia in that respect?***

Corruption undermines the fundamental values of social relations of any democratic society. It undermines the rule of law and its efficiency, trust in public institutions, integrity, fairness, equality, equity and citizen security.

Academic corruption is a very dangerous and dynamic phenomenon, and the CHEA study you mentioned points out that it is occurring at several levels – from the regulatory framework coming “from above,” through the role of teachers, the enrolment process, student grading, issuance of higher education qualifications, to research and publication. It should be added that the development of sophisticated technologies, and the very nature of information and communication technology, created greater opportunities for fraud in all areas, including education.

This is certainly a global problem, affecting both rich and poor countries, and similarly undermining the quality and credibility of higher education, making knowledge less important.

It is interesting that the study in question identifies higher education quality assurance systems as those that should lead the fight against corruption; one way of making this work is, among others, through international networking. This is a global initiative, but we have yet to see how successful it will be.

As far as Croatia is concerned, issues of academic integrity and freedom, ethical behaviour, tolerance and discrimination in the academic environment are firmly embedded in our standards for the evaluation of higher education institutions. Through the process of re-accreditation, the effectiveness of HEI's internal quality assurance mechanisms is checked, including the mechanisms for monitoring unethical behaviour in teaching and research.

I would also like to mention the State Matura exam and the centralized processing of applications to study programmes (via *Postani student* website), both introduced in 2010, as important anti-corruption tools. Such a transparent system was a major step forward in the fight against corruption at the level of enrolment. The Agency, or – to be more precise – its Central Applications Office (CAO), has a significant role in this process. CAO integrates activities related to the process of applying to study programmes, one of the most important being the effective central processing of applications, which enables an equal treatment of all applicants.

Lately, there is also an issue with fake diplomas. Our ENIC/NARIC Office, which deals with recognition of foreign higher education qualifications, is putting in a significant effort in examining the authenticity of submitted diplomas and other related documents from other countries. We are very proactive when it comes to international cooperation, and we regularly share experiences with our colleagues from abroad in order to improve the methods of authentication.

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