

# Open Letter to the Croatian Government on the State of Research and Higher Education in Croatia and the Development Plan up to 2026

Following the biggest crisis to have struck Europe since World War II, the Republic of Croatia has been allocated the proportionally largest amount of money of all the EU countries from the European Commission's Next Generation EU budget. The Croatian government's National Plan for Recovery and Resilience 2021–2026 has declared that it will make the largest investment into research & innovation and higher education (R&I and HE) ever – 2.4b HRK or c. €320m. The Republic of Croatia's lack of R&I and HE funding has regularly been highlighted as a fundamental problem, a lack has meant that vital sectoral reforms have been left unimplemented or have been postponed. Now, in the forthcoming period we have an extraordinary opportunity to develop new legislation, reform the institutions and allocate significant financial resources responsibly, in order to improve the quality of Croatian R&I and HE. Without systematic reforms, based on the objectives and measures set out in the Croatian government's National Development Strategy, Croatia will not be able to move up from the bottom of the list of European countries.

With this Open Letter we want to send a message to the Croatian government, but also to all stakeholders involved in the creation of new legislation, institutional reform, and resource distribution, that we now have a historic moment in which to implement much-needed substantial changes. As a group of researchers from Croatia and abroad, we feel the need to get involved in this process and to contribute to raising the quality of Croatian R&I and HE, as well as of the work conditions of our research and teaching staff. To achieve this, we propose a set of six key principles on which the academic system should be based, and a set of six specific measures to be taken to support such a system.

I. The R&I and HE system should be established on the following principles:

1. Freedom and responsibility in research and teaching
2. Originality and innovation in research and teaching
3. Openness and the international recognition of research
4. Merit-based staff selection and promotion, and of the distribution of funds
5. Responsibility and transparency in funding
6. Ethics in research and teaching

II. In order to take advantage of this historical opportunity and organize the system of R&I and HE in Croatia in line with the above principles, we propose the following measures:

1. The new legislation should be based on an analysis of the current situation, and on comparisons with the practices of successful European countries in R&I and HE. Various stakeholders should be involved in the process of drafting new regulations, especially prominent researchers and teachers with extensive international experience, and European Research Area representatives. A public consultation on the new legislation should be organized in a timely manner and in several steps.
2. All documents on the implementation of reforms and investments, but also reports on irregularities and reimbursements, as well as progress monitoring reports, should be publicly available.
3. A comprehensive, fair, and responsible system of state funding should be established for public research institutes and universities with transparent and measurable performance indicators, with the objectives evaluated periodically.
4. A comprehensive, independent, and effective quality assurance system should be set up for public research institutions and universities, with the objectives evaluated periodically. Members of national (The National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development, Croatian Science Foundation, Agency for Science and Higher Education etc.) and other bodies and committees should be elected according to the principles of merit and inclusion.
5. The independent work of the Croatian Science Foundation (Hrvatska zaklada za znanost, HRZZ) must be ensured. HRZZ should be adequately funded, staffed and organised.
6. A national board for ethics in R&I and HE should be established, to which all other ethical committees report. There should be at least one representative of prominent Croatian researchers abroad in this body. This body should be tasked with producing documents based on guidelines drawn from the best European practices linked to academic integrity and ethics. It should also advise on, promote, and offer training in those values within the Croatian academic community. Until this board is established, the work of the Council for Ethics in Research and Higher Education should be facilitated without interruption.

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