

## Croatian academics' attitudes on the importance of academic profession competencies<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

*Academic profession is faced with changes and challenges in social environment that occur in the global area of higher education. These challenges call for (re)defining the existing and introducing new competencies for performing everyday academic duties. The research findings presented in this paper, attempt to answer the research question What are the competencies academics need at the start of their senior academic career? The research was conducted on a sample of 1130 academics of all academic positions from seven public universities in Croatia. The online survey examined the attitudes about how important each competency is to successfully perform the role of a senior academic as well as their assessment of the mastery of each competency. The evaluation scale contained 41 items - academic profession competencies. This paper will present the results of the rankings on the scale evaluating the importance of academic profession competencies and corresponding discussion about new research questions that has been opened. Some of these questions are related to discussions on approaches to acquiring new and/or redefining existing competencies of the academic profession and systems of support for acquiring and redefining academic profession' competencies.*

**Keywords:** Academic profession, Academic profession competencies, (Senior) Academics

### **1. Introduction**

Changes in the (social) environment, to which academic profession did not remain immune, are in strong correlation with the transformation of academic affairs and activities in the last few decades. The former core activities that used to mark academic profession - teaching and research, are becoming only a part of a wide range of activities. Universities and academics are in constant interaction with a number of stakeholders from the external (social) environment - students and their parents, politicians, business sector and the labour market, the economy, previous levels of education, public and private institutions. Purcell (2008) points out that society has great expectations from academics, and classifies those expectations as - contribution to the growth of the knowledge economy; development and maintenance of large and advanced knowledge base; high quality education and training; lifelong learning; excellence in research and counselling; implementation of an international, multicultural education; promotion of equal opportunities and access to higher education. In addition to the above mentioned, academics are also faced with pressures and demands in connection with academic progress on everyday basis. In such conditions of academic staff is expected to develop new competencies that would enable the fulfilment of

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the new requirements and the performance of new activities (Musselin, 2007). Studies that examined changes in the academic profession and (new) requirements that academics are expected to meet (Neave, 1983; Altbach & Davis, 1999; Altbach, 2000; Deem, 2001; Altbach, 2002; Kelly & Murphy, 2007; Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009; Turk, 2015) suggest that new, multidimensional and sometimes contradictory expectations are being created in addition to the basic academic activities - teaching and research (Ledić, 2012). All this led to the need of redefining and developing (new) competencies that have not been requested until now or have not been considered significant and important in academic work.

Teaching and research are traditionally viewed as core academic activities, which are considered the most important in the system of academics' advancement. Both those activities, that is, their interconnectedness and distinctness, have been the subject of numerous research studies (Ramsden & Moses, 1992; Braxton 1993, Bess, 1998; Colbeck, 2002, McInnis, 2000; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Brew, 2006; Kogan & Teichler, 2007; Locke & Teichler, 2007). In addition to better understanding the nature of academic activities, the said research studies are also connected with numerous institutional and governmental or political practices (Ćulum, Rončević & Ledić, 2013).

Observed from a quantitative point of view, most of the researches and debates revolve around teaching competencies of the academic profession (Inlow 1956; Elton, 1986, 1992, 2001; Knight, 1995; Rychen & Salganik 2003; Koster & Dengerink, 2008; Henard & Roseveare, 2012). Recent research studies (Kroeber, 2007; Marton, 2007; Donaldson, 2013) suggests that teachers in the 21st century, regardless of educational level, must enable future generations to make progress in an environment of rapid, lasting and fundamental changes, but at the same time they must use those potentially far-reaching challenges that systems of teaching and learning are faced with. "Teachers are important" is the title of OECD's report for 2005 which summarizes a wide range of evidence that suggest that good teachers are one of the most important factors influencing the successful of learning. Likewise, in 2007, corporation McKinsey published a report (McKinsey, 2007) in which it emphasizes the importance of good teachers in the most productive educational systems in the world. Concluding passages of the report specifically point out that the quality of the education system cannot surpass the quality of a teacher.

In addition to mentioned researches, projects and recommendations on the level of the European education policy (for example: DeSeCo project (OECD, 2005), *European Language Teacher Education* (Kelly & Grenfell, 2002; Kelly et al., 2004), TALIS research, *Common European Principles for Teacher Competence and Qualifications* (2004)), point to a wide range of responsibilities and competencies that academics need in order to successfully teach. In addition, they confirm the conclusions from the document by the European Commission - *Supporting the teaching Profession for Better Learning Outcomes* (2012) that requirements for the development of teaching competencies are always present, but that they are also under the constant influence of social and technological.

Although research competencies haven't produced the same interest as teaching competencies, they too were discussed. One of the significant contributions to the structuring and systematization of research competencies was given by a document of a more recent date entitled *Skills and competencies needed in the research field objectives 2020* (2010). This document highlights significant changes that are taking place in the European research area, which haven't bypassed research institutions. Powerful globalization pressures, increased openness of the research market, a strong mobility trend among researchers, insistence on the increased interdisciplinarity and on

the cooperation of various research teams, as well as political investments in research and innovation are just some of the factors that influence changes in European research policies. Likewise, UNESCO World Report - *Towards Knowledge Societies* (2005), in the chapter on research and the relationship between science and the public, highlights the disparities in research fields, the spreading and almost complete disappearance of boundaries of research information, as well as the development of new research fields and raises the issue of intellectual ownership. As a consequence of dealing with such changes, the question arises what are the knowledge, skills and abilities that characterize an exceptional researcher.

International discussions, research studies and recommendations on the level of educational policies on teaching competencies, and to a lesser extent, research competencies of academics, have been producing new lists of competencies and have been upgrading the existing ones. In addition to teaching and research competencies, and given the changes in the academic profession, requirements for the development of new academic competencies have started to appear in recent years. This refers to the development of competencies resulting from the requirement for the advancement of the third mission of universities (Boyer, 1990, 1996; Macfarlane, 2005, 2007; Ledić, 2007; Cantor, 2010; Ćulum & Ledić, 2010; Ćulum, 2012), as well as for those aimed at leadership in the research and higher education (Hoff, 1999; Nelson, 2003; Smith, 2004; Spendlove, 2007; Crosthwaite, 2010; Dávila Quintana, Mora Ruiz & Vila Lladós, 2011; Potgieter, Basson & Coetzee, 2011).

Under the influence of external pressures and expectations that universities are facing with for the purpose of a stronger contribution to society or to the knowledge economy (Brennan et. all, 2007), in the last two decades debates have been increasing. The debates are focused on the analysis and better understanding of relationships and various modalities of cooperation between universities and the environment in which they operates. Most authors agree that the concept of the third mission examines the role of the university and its contribution to local, regional and national development (Goddard & Chatterton, 2003; Arbo & Benneworth, 2006; Benneworth & Hospers, 2007).

In research studies, the fourth group of academic profession' competencies is represented by a group of so-called *leadership competencies* or the competencies of leadership in higher education (Hoff, 1999; Burkard et al., 2005; Spendlove, 2007; Quintana, Mora Ruiz & Vila Lladós, 2011). Based on the analysis of discussions on this group of competencies, it can be concluded that the group of leadership competencies in higher education has an important place in the debate about the academics' competencies and that it was redefined over the years and steered towards the growing number of academics. From the initial exclusive focus on the leaders of higher education institutions, leadership competencies in higher education are also becoming increasingly focused on a wider range of academics at different stages in their careers.

Research on the academic profession competencies in Croatia were predominantly focused on the group of teaching competencies. Based on the analysis of the mentioned research studies, it can be concluded that the discussions of various authors (Smith, 1996, 2001; Calin, 2004; Munjiza & Lucas, 2006; Ledić, 2009; Vizek Vidović, 2009; Rački, Peko & Varga, 2010) can be reduced to two key challenges: the need to revise legislative regulations on the academic promotion procedures, which would result in achieving an equal evaluation of their teaching and research work; and the need to invest in the academic development programmes.

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For many years, Croatian research area was deprived of results and discussions on academics' research competencies, which would examine those competencies in a wider context. However, in recent years, a couple of research studies did appear in the national research area which examined the position and academic promotion of young researchers. Those studies (Brajdić Vuković, 2012, 2013) deal with the issues of research competencies of young researcher in a wider context. Particularly noteworthy is the lack of formal system for the support and development of research competencies of young researchers, as well as the lack of formal support for their overall professional development.

In the context of the academics third mission competencies, studies predominantly aim to introduce the concept in the national research area (Ledić, 2007; Ćulum 2009; Ćulum & Ledić, 2010; Ćulum, 2012), explore academics' attitudes regarding the third mission (Ćulum, 2012; Ćulum & Ledić, 2011; Ćulum, Ledić & Rončević, 2013) and, in a somewhat wider context, social dimensions in higher education (Puzić, Doolan & Dolenc, 2006, Farnell & Smith, 2010; Farnell et al., 2013). On the other hand, the determinants of leadership competencies in higher education are represented in the context of analysis and discussion regarding the governance in higher education (Smith, Ledić & Rafajac, 2002; 2003; 2007) and, to somewhat lesser extent, analysis and discussions regarding the quality management systems in higher education (Ledić 1994; Lazibat, 2005).

An overview of various determinants of competencies suggests that dispersed and great expectations from the academic profession represent a research challenge in the structuring and operationalization of the academic profession competencies. In that context, it is necessary to take into account not only particularities of individual competencies approaches or groups of competencies specific to a particular profession, but also the particularities of national environments and conditions in which that profession develops and operates. At the same time, directions of current education policies in the European and national environment reveal that Croatian academics too will be expected to meet the requirements for the development of (new) set of competencies<sup>1</sup>. In this context, (re)defining and profiling of existing and new competencies of the academic profession becomes a question *par excellence* in the academic community in Croatia.

## 2. Research methodology, findings and discussion

So far the area of comprehensive discussion about the academic profession' competencies in the national research area hasn't produced a significant interest of Croatian researchers. The analysis of literature reveals that authors draw attention to the differences in the levels of the academic profession, especially to the differences between junior and senior academics, strenuousness of their responsibilities and job descriptions (Teichler, 1996; Höhle & Teichler, 2013; Fumasoli & Gostelac, 2015). Höhle and Teichler (2013) draw attention to the longevity of the period required for the process of learning and maturing in the academic profession. Therefore, it should be assumed that it is not possible to speak of a unique set of competencies that would apply to all academic levels.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in the national research area, a document entitled *Strategy for Education, Science and Technology* (2013, 108) emphasizes that the role of higher education teachers - representatives of the academic profession - has changed in society and that it includes "... the four segments of activities: teaching (educational); research/artistic; organizational, managerial and professional activities in academic bodies; engagement in the third mission of higher education institutions (activity aimed at contributing to the development and improvement of the community)."

This research seeks to answer the question what are the competencies an academic should have at the start of his/her senior academic career. When collecting research findings for the purpose of answering the raised research question, the attitudes of academics regarding the importance of competencies of the academic profession are of the utmost importance. Therefore, the objective of this part of research<sup>1</sup> is to examine the attitudes of academics on the importance of each competencies for the successful accomplishment of their academic activities at the start of their senior academic career.

Research method in this research was an on-line survey, and the research instrument used was a survey questionnaire<sup>2</sup>. Evaluation was carried out on a classic Likert-type scale, with competencies described as being of 1 - very small importance, 2 - small importance, 3 - average importance, 4 - great importance, 5 - extremely great importance. A total of 1130 respondents participated in the research from seven Croatian public universities, which is between 10 and 13% of the total population. The data were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (IBM SPSS Statistics 20.0). In this paper, we will present the results of descriptive statistics - the mean and standard deviation, as well as answer percentages on a Likert-type scale.

Since the literature on the academic profession competencies varies greatly, arranging competencies according to their thematic groups was a research challenge. Competencies were finally arranged into five thematic groups – teaching competencies<sup>3</sup>, research competencies<sup>4</sup>, third mission competencies<sup>5</sup>, leadership competencies in higher education<sup>6</sup> and general (academic) competencies<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The survey questionnaire contained a preamble and three content unit. The first unit contained demographic information defined on the basis of independent research variables - titles, fields, universities, gender and age. The second unit was the scale for the evaluation of the importance of particular competencies for the successful performance of the successful accomplishment of their academic activities at the start of their senior academic career. The third unit is an evaluation scale of their level of mastery over given competencies up to their current academic career level. For the purposes of this paper, results obtained based on the analysis of answers from the second unit of the survey questionnaire shall be used.

<sup>3</sup> Developing curricula; Understanding and the application of theories that learning and teaching processes are based on; Setting clear objectives and results in the process of teaching and learning; Planning and carrying out teaching; Applying various methods of teaching harmonized with learning results; Applying active learning techniques in the teaching process; Creating environment that will encourage students to learn; Applying various procedures of assessment and evaluation of students' success aligned with learning results; Applying research findings in teaching; Using e-learning and its integration in teaching; Adjustment of the teaching process to students with special needs; Monitoring and advising younger colleagues in relation to teaching work; Introducing changes in the curricula.

<sup>4</sup> Knowledge in the field of research methodology and statistical data processing; Using efficient strategies of searching through research and profession-related literature; Working in an interdisciplinary environment; Using efficient strategies of critical assessment and analysis of scientific literature; Familiarity with the basic principles of scientific writing and publishing; Monitoring and advising younger colleagues in relation to research work; Implementing review procedures in one's own research field; Familiarity with program/project management (writing, applying and managing programs/projects); Familiarity with financing opportunities for projects in the field of one's own research interest; Creating and maintaining (international) research networks.

<sup>5</sup> Educating students as social responsible and active citizens; Implementation of projects which are significant in terms of community's needs; Participation in volunteer and philanthropic programs and activities in the community; Encouraging students to participate in volunteer programs and programs that contribute to the development of the community; Participating in public discussions of general social importance from the professional perspective; Cooperation with the civil sector

<sup>6</sup> Familiarity with strategic planning principles; Familiarity with negotiation and conflict resolution principles; Managing financial resources of the institution/department/course; Defining ethical values of the institution/department/course; Introducing innovations and changes in the work of the institution/department/course

<sup>7</sup> The group of general academic competencies consists of competencies that appeared in theoretical descriptions of all previous groups of competencies. In order to avoid repeating the same items, a new group of competencies was formed

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Table 1 shows academic profession competencies based on the estimates of their importance. Given the arithmetic mean of each individual item, it is evident that respondents estimate individual competencies as having a relatively high importance<sup>1</sup>. That is not surprising since respondents were offered competencies that should be relevant to the academic profession according to the literature in this field.

Table 1 reveals that respondents evaluated the following competencies as the most important ones: General IT literacy (Windows, Microsoft Office, Internet, e-mail) (M=4.71, SD=0.53); Oral and written communication in the mother tongue (M=4.68, SD=0.56); Planning and carrying out teaching (M=4.42, SD=0.75); Familiarity with the basic principles of scientific writing and publishing (M=4.41, SD=0.73); and the Using efficient strategies of searching through research and profession-related literature (M=4.35, SD=0.73).

If we compare the estimates of respondents with predefined groups of competencies, it can be observed that the top five most important competencies are these from the group of general academic competencies (*General IT literacy* and *Oral and written communication in the mother tongue*), teaching competencies (*Planning and performing teaching*) and research competencies (*Familiarity with the basic principles of scientific writing and publishing* and *Using efficient strategies of searching through research and profession-related literature*).

Table 1. The estimate of importance of academic profession competencies

	COMPETENCIES	1+2	3	4+5	M	SD
1.	General IT literacy (Windows, Microsoft Office, Internet, e-mail)	0.1	3.5	96.3	4.71	0.53
2.	Oral and written communication in the mother tongue	0.3	3.2	96.5	4.68	0.56
3.	Planning and carrying out teaching	2.2	6.5	91.2	4.42	0.75
4.	Familiarity with the basic principles of scientific writing and publishing	2.0	7.8	90.2	4.41	0.73
5.	Using efficient strategies of searching through research and profession-related literature	1.5	10.4	88.2	4.35	0.73
6.	Presentation skills	1.4	9.7	88.9	4.33	0.72
7.	Oral and written communication in at least one world language	2.0	11.5	86.6	4.30	0.76
8.	Familiarity with ethical principles in teaching and research	3.6	11.8	84.6	4.28	0.84
9.	Setting clear objectives and results in the process of teaching and learning	2.0	12.6	85.5	4.25	0.76
10.	Educating students as social responsible and active citizens	4.0	15.6	80.4	4.12	0.83
11.	Constant professional development and personal growth planning in fundamental academic activities	3.3	17.3	79.5	4.11	0.81
12.	Working in interdisciplinary environment	5.4	16.3	78.4	4.08	0.91
13.	Creating environment that will encourage students to learn	2.8	18.5	78.8	4.07	0.79
14.	Applying research findings in teaching	7.2	17.4	75.4	4.00	0.94

the content of which corresponding to competencies entitled general academic competencies - Oral and written communication in the mother tongue; Leading teams and individuals; Oral and written communication in at least one world language; General IT literacy (Windows, Microsoft Office, Internet, e-mail); Presentation skills; Constant professional development and personal growth planning in fundamental academic activities; Cooperation with the public sector and economy (institutions and companies from the related field); Familiarity and the application of fundamental legal documents (acts, regulations...) in the area of science and higher education; Identifying and monitoring recent changes in educational and research policies; Having basic knowledge about intellectual ownership; Familiarity with ethical principles in teaching and research.

<sup>1</sup> Arithmetic means range from the lowest (M2, 89) to the highest (M = 4.71), where 28 competencies were evaluated as being of great importance (ranging from M = 3.54 to M = 4.42).

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15.	Using efficient strategies of critical assessment and analysis of scientific literature	4.7	21.9	73.3	3.99	0.89
16.	Introducing changes in the teaching plan and program	9.1	17.7	73.2	3.95	1.04
17.	Leading teams and individuals	5.9	21.2	73.0	3.94	0.88
18.	Defining ethical values of the institution/department/course	10.2	19.7	70.0	3.89	1.02
19.	Applying various methods of teaching harmonized with learning results	6.3	23.3	70.4	3.89	0.90
20.	Applying various procedures of assessment and evaluation of students' success harmonized with learning results	6.6	23.8	69.6	3.87	0.91
21.	Creating teaching plans and syllabus	10.3	17.6	72.0	3.86	0.99
22.	Understanding and the application of theories that learning and teaching processes are based on	7.6	22.6	69.9	3.86	0.92
23.	Applying active learning techniques in the teaching process	9.4	26.7	63.9	3.77	0.97
24.	Introducing innovations and changes in the work of the institution/department/course	11.4	23.9	64.8	3.76	1.03
25.	Implementing review procedures in one's own research field	18.9	15.0	66.1	3.75	1.29
26.	Knowledge in the field of research methodology and statistical data processing	10.3	26.7	63.0	3.74	0.99
27.	Familiarity with negotiation and conflict resolution principles	10.0	27.0	63.0	3.71	0.94
28.	Monitoring and advising younger colleagues in relation to research work	16.6	20.6	62.7	3.67	1.15
29.	Monitoring and advising younger colleagues in relation to teaching work	19.7	20.8	59.4	3.56	1.21
30.	Implementation of projects which are significant in terms of community's needs	16.4	28.8	54.8	3.54	1.06
31.	Identifying and monitoring recent changes in educational and research policies	15.4	35.6	49.1	3.43	1.00
32.	Using e-learning and its integration in teaching	26.0	25.5	48.6	3.31	1.23
33.	Familiarity and the application of fundamental legal documents (acts, regulations...) in the area of research and higher education	21.6	33.5	45.0	3.29	1.05
34.	Encouraging students to participate in volunteer programs and programs that contribute to the development of the community	25.1	31.1	43.9	3.26	1.17
35.	Familiarity with program/project management (writing, applying and managing programs/projects)	25.2	32.0	42.7	3.24	1.16
36.	Familiarity with strategic planning principles	24.2	32.7	43.1	3.23	1.06
37.	Familiarity with financing opportunities for projects in the field of one's own research interest	24.5	34.0	41.6	3.23	1.10
38.	Participation in the volunteer and philanthropic programs and activities in the community	27.8	30.8	41.4	3.20	1.17
39.	Creating and maintaining (international) research networks	29.9	29.2	40.9	3.16	1.21
40.	Cooperation with the public sector and economy (institutions and companies from the related field)	32.2	26.2	41.6	3.11	1.26
41.	Having basic knowledge about intellectual ownership	28.3	35.1	36.6	3.09	1.11
42.	Participating in public discussions of general social importance from the professional perspective	29.6	34.8	35.6	3.07	1.12
43.	Managing financial resources of the institution/department/course	34.5	26.2	39.3	3.04	1.28
44.	Cooperation with the civil sector	34.2	32.0	33.7	2.94	1.16
45.	Adjustment of the teaching process to students with special needs	37.5	31.0	31.6	2.89	1.19

The first two competencies ranked as most important ones are also competencies emphasized in the list of competencies for lifelong learning in the European Framework of Key Competencies

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for Lifelong Learning (2004). The Framework describes general IT literacy in the context of digital competency, where it states that it involves the confident and critical use of electronic media for work, leisure and communication. The Framework also emphasizes that general IT literacy is connected with logical and critical thinking, high-level of information management skills and well developed communication skills. Communication in the mother tongue as "... the ability to express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form (listening, speaking, reading and writing), and to interact linguistically in an appropriate and creative way in a full range of societal and cultural contexts - in education and training, work, home and leisure." (European Reference Framework of Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning, 2007, 8) is another of the eight key competencies listed in the Framework and can be considered an unavoidable competency in the everyday social and academic environment. From displayed data, it is evident that Croatian academics, apart from general (academic) competencies, perceive the traditional academic teaching and research competencies as most important for performing the role of an academic. A review of these competencies reveals that competencies in question form the basis of teaching (*Planning and carrying out teaching*) or research (*Familiarity with the basic principles of scientific writing and publishing* and *Using efficient strategies of searching through research and profession-related literature*) work. Authors who examine teaching competencies and higher education (Smith, 2001; Lammers & Murphy, 2002; Kroeber, 2007; Taylor, 2010; Donaldson, 2013) highlight the competency of planning and carrying out teaching as fundamental in terms of familiarity with the teaching process or as a fundamental characteristic of good/highly competent teacher. Likewise, the familiarity with the basic principles of scientific writing and publishing can be considered a precondition for the successful performance of research activities, especially at the beginning of their research careers (Vizek Vidović, Brajdić Vuković & Matić, 2014).

Unlike the mentioned ones, the following competencies were evaluated by respondents as least important: *Having basic knowledge about intellectual ownership* (M=3.09, SD=1.11); *Participating in public discussions of general social importance from the professional perspective* (M=3.07, SD=1.12); *Managing financial resources of the institution/department/course* (M=3.04, SD=1.28); *Cooperation with the civil sector* (M=2.94, SD=1.16); and *Adjustment of the teaching process to students with special needs* (M=2.89, SD=1.19).

Results presented reveal that the least important competencies come from all groups of competencies - one from general academic competencies (*Having basic knowledge about intellectual ownership*), one from leadership in higher education (*Managing financial resources of the institution/department/course*), one from teaching competencies (*Adjustment of the teaching process to students with special needs*), while two competencies, based on the theoretical analysis, belong to third mission competencies (*Participating in public discussions of general social importance from the professional perspective* and *Cooperation with the civil sector*).

The results that indicate that third mission competencies were evaluated as being of little importance, in the context of research findings are not surprising since the third mission of universities in the national environment is a concept whose implementation began recently (Ledić, 2007; Ćulum 2012; Ćulum & Ledić, 2010; 2011). The results of conducted research studies suggest that Croatian academics do not recognize the concept of the third mission and show a relatively low sensibility to it. They also reveal significant lack of educational contents required for its understanding, as well as insufficient involvement of the concept of the third mission in the core academic activities - teaching and research (Ćulum, 2012; 2013; Ćulum & Ledić, 2011). However,

although recognized at the level of policy documents<sup>1</sup>, the results of this research partially confirm previous research findings, revealing that the implementation of this concept in the academic community is still incomplete. To elaborate, based on the evaluation of importance, the third mission competencies are ranked low, that is, between 30th and 45th place, with the exception of competency relating to the education of students as social responsible and active citizens. These results imply that academics (still) don't sufficiently recognize the importance of this concept and acknowledge the need for stronger and systematic implementation of the third mission activities in the academic community in Croatia as well as the need for considering other possible models and ways of acquiring third mission competencies by academics. Especially surprising, even worrying, is the rank of the competency *Adjustment of the teaching process to students with special needs* (M=2.89, SD=1.19). Based on their evaluation of its importance, academics in Croatia perceive this competency as least important of all proposed competencies of the academic profession. The question of students with special needs is a part of the problem of equal opportunities in the context of discussions on the access to higher education which is analysed and examined within the framework of social dimensions in education. In this context, it is implied that higher education institutions must play an important role in the reduction of social inequalities by encouraging greater inclusion of students from vulnerable social groups and by removing barriers they encounter with regards to their access to and completion of studies (Farnell & Kovač, 2011)<sup>2</sup>.

It can, therefore, be assumed that academics are not sufficiently sensitive to the issues of students/people with special needs, and in this context it is possible to raise the question of Croatian academics' awareness of the social dimension. It is possible, therefore, to raise questions whether academics are prepared to adjust their teaching process to students with special needs, do they possess necessary awareness and sensitivity towards special social groups and whether, in that context, they are able to prepare socially sensitive and socially responsible students.

### 3. Final thoughts

By positioning the role of academics in the wider context of changes and demands for (re)defining the competencies of the academic profession, the aim of the presented research was to examine the attitudes of Croatian academics on the importance of academic competencies needed for the successful accomplishment of their academic activities at the start of their senior academic career.

The results of conducted research indicate that academics don't observe the importance of academic profession competencies strictly within the framework of a given academic discourse, that is, through core academic activities - teaching and research, but in a much broader context and in line with the recommendations of numerous policy documents at the international level.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the concept of the third mission of universities experienced a significant recognition in the period between the findings of conducted research studies (Ćulum, 2010; 2013; Ćulum & Ledić, 2011) and today, in the form of the latest document on the development of science and higher education on the national level and that is the Croatian Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (2013). Recognised in the Strategy as one of the measures is that - "The third mission is becoming an ever more articulated duty of higher education institutions. It includes a number of activities and engagements aimed at developing and improving economic, cultural and civil life, and includes an integrative concept of cooperation according to which the university is obligated to contribute to all sectors of society, as well as the civic mission of the university oriented towards educating socially responsible and active citizens" (Croatian Strategy for Education, Science and Technology, 2013, 108-109).

<sup>2</sup> Research results (Cvitan et al., 2011) reveal that 68% of students who indicated that they encounter people with physical or mental disabilities during their studies, claimed that not enough or only partial attention is paid to problems of such students.

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However, the results revealed that the concept of the third mission was evaluated as being of little importance. In this context, it would be necessary to additionally explore possible mechanisms for the better implementation of the third mission concept in the core academic activities, in line with the findings of earlier research studies on the attributes of academics who are better prepared for the integration of the third mission (Ćulum, 2012).

Of particular concern is the result that reveals a low level of sensibility to the problems of students/people with special needs, in the context of which it is possible to discuss the issue of Croatian academics' awareness of the social dimension. Since this research study could not determine the implications of such an attitude, in the context of discussions on the social dimension in higher education it would be necessary to examine the level of sensibility of academics to people/students with special needs and to identify the authentic reasons for such attitudes.

In addition to the specific topics connected with particular competencies, this research study also provoked the discussion on the academic profession competencies in the national academic area. Following the results of this research, and in order to acknowledge the competencies of the academic profession in the wider frameworks of educational policies, it would be important to examine the readiness and support of its (current) creators regarding the competencies approach as an important element in the planning of development activities and the promotion of the academic profession.

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