



THE CROATIAN ADULT EDUCATION VOUCHER SYSTEM OFFERS FREE TRAINING FOR EMPLOYED AND UNEMPLOYED PEOPLE, PRIORITISING THOSE WHO ARE VULNERABLE, TO ACQUIRE GREEN AND DIGITAL SKILLS THAT CAN IMPROVE THEIR EMPLOYABILITY IN THE LABOUR MARKET.

Voucher-based adult education scheme

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CROATIA

In April 2022, the Croatian Employment Service (HZZ) initiated a voucher-based adult education scheme, financed through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). Aligned with the Croatian Qualifications Framework (CROQF), it provides financial support for PES users seeking to acquire green, digital or other in-demand micro-qualifications, partial or full qualifications. Voucher values range from approximately EUR 500 to EUR 2,500 and are directly transferred to the education provider. The target group is those aged 15+, with a special emphasis on vulnerable groups.

Name of the PES

Croatian Employment Services - HZZ (Croatian PES)

Scope of measure
(a pilot project or a national reform)

National reform

When was the practice implemented? (including start and end date for pilot projects)

From 1 April 2022 until 2026 (ongoing)
The project has two EU funding sources: the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) from 2021-2025 and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) from June 2023 to 2026.

What was the driver for introducing the practice? Was it internal or external?

The Ministry of Labour decided to introduce a voucher system for adult education at the end of 2021, resulting in the Adult Education Act¹. The voucher system aims to improve the skills and employability of vulnerable groups, fill the skill gaps in the workforce (especially in green and digital areas), encourage lifelong learning, and boost economic development and competitiveness. It is aligned with national and regional educational policies and strategies to increase education and training opportunities for the population.
The CROQF is the regulatory framework for qualifications, establishing standards based on learning outcomes that match the needs of the labour market, workers, and society. An initial skills mapping based on the CROQF determined the educational programmes eligible for voucher allocation. This resulted in the creation of a Catalogue of Skills for the digital and green transitions. The Catalogue contains 3,427 digital skills and 948 green skills, covering 149 educational institutions and 1,075 programmes across 202 themes.

Which organisation was involved in its implementation?

The project is led by the Ministry of Labour, in collaboration with the Ministry of Science and Education. The HZZ implements the project. It receives support from relevant stakeholders, such as the Croatian Vocational Education and Training (VET) agency and training associations, which offer their expertise as education or training providers.

Which groups were targeted by the practice?

The project provides training vouchers to participants aged 15+, regardless of their employment status. The vouchers can be used to acquire essential skills for career development and job security. Financed through the RRF, the programme aims to reach 40,000 beneficiaries, including 12,000 from vulnerable groups (long-term unemployed and those not in education, employment, or training (NEET)). Funding from the ESF+ will expand the initiative to include an additional 75,000 participants.

¹ Adult Education Act, 2021, <https://zakon.hr/z/384/Zakon-o-obrazovanju-odraslih> (last accessed on 3 November 2023).

What were the practice's main objectives?

The voucher system has several objectives:

- ▶ To provide beneficiaries with relevant skills to enhance their career prospects and job retention. It also lays the foundation for establishing individual learning accounts in Croatia.
- ▶ To target vulnerable groups, such as long-term unemployed people, NEETs, and inactive PES users, and increase their access to education and training opportunities.
- ▶ To balance the development of green and digital skills, with 40% of the resources dedicated to green skills and 60% to digital skills. The initiative aims to reach 105,000 users.
- ▶ To align the skills acquired with the CROQF and the EU Recommendation on European Qualifications Framework (2017)², ensuring their recognition and value in the labour market.
- ▶ To offer financial support to PES users (ranging from EUR 150 to EUR 2,800) and reduce the barriers to education and skill development.
- ▶ To contribute to social resilience and sustainable development, as the funding for green and digital skills comes from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan

What activities were carried out?

Key activities to implement the voucher system in Croatia include:

- ▶ Establishing the legal framework: The Adult Education Act was adopted at the end of 2021 and outlines how the voucher system should operate. It required updates to the CROQF and occupational standards.
- ▶ Skills mapping: The Ministry of Labour conducts skills mapping to match the skills required by the labour market, especially in green and digital sectors. The Ministry uses artificial intelligence (AI) to analyse current and future trends in skills demand and supply. Skills mapping is a key component of the voucher system, as it helps to identify the training needs and opportunities for workers.
- ▶ Defining criteria to grant vouchers: This process is a collaborative effort that includes internal actors (Ministry of Labour, PES) and external stakeholders (education providers, users). The criteria are clearly outlined on the online platform and are aligned with labour market needs, the CROQF, and EU funding eligibility conditions.
- ▶ Web-based voucher application system: Users apply online for vouchers to cover the costs of education programmes in green or digital skills. The team of advisers from the HZZ manages the application process and evaluates the applications based on eligibility, relevance, and quality criteria. Successful applicants pay the education provider directly with the vouchers and may change their course during the validity period. Upon programme completion, users report on outcomes through satisfaction surveys.
- ▶ Training for the adviser team: The adviser team within the HZZ's Career Guidance and Education Department is trained to manage the voucher system effectively. This training equips them with the knowledge and skills to guide users through the system, help them to make informed choices and support their skills development.
- ▶ Engaging vulnerable groups: The HZZ has developed a Jobsplus training project for vulnerable groups. This enables disadvantaged people to receive preliminary training and essential guidance services, such as career advice, job counselling, and the acquisition of essential skills for the green and digital transitions.
- ▶ Development of a micro-credential system: Micro-credentials provide a flexible and modular approach to learning, aligning with the needs of the workforce. Developing a system for recognising micro-credentials enhances the effectiveness of the voucher system.

What resources and other relevant organisational aspects were involved?

The project is managed by a central team of advisers from the HZZ's Career Guidance and Education Department. These advisers are responsible for processing voucher applications and engaging potential users. The project uses an online platform that simplifies the administration and documentation of the vouchers. The advisers are trained to use the platform and contact the target audience.

What were the source(s) of funding?

From June 2023, training programmes outside green and digital skills development (so-called general areas) have been co-financed through the ESF+, while green and digital skills are co-financed through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. Through the voucher system, beneficiaries can co-finance any educational programme adhering to the CROQF standard and provided by an educational institution registered for the voucher system. The total budget amounts to HRK 300 million (approx. EUR 40 million) through the RRF and EUR 100 million through the ESF+. Other expenses incurred by participants, such as travel, medical expenses, and other financial burdens, are supported by the state budget. For balance, the initiative allocates 40% of its resources to the development of green skills, and 60% to digital skills and related programmes.

² Council Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, 22 May 2017.

What were the outputs of the practice: people reached and products?

The project has three main outputs:

- ▶ A web-based platform that streamlines the application process, facilitates communication and collaboration among users, education providers, and training programmes, and offers a comprehensive Skills Catalogue.
- ▶ A target group of 105,000 users eligible for the vouchers to learn new skills. After 18 months of project implementation, 12,000 users have registered and enrolled in one of the 900 programmes or training courses in the database.
- ▶ Annual evaluation reports and regular monitoring assessments. They contain content analysis, financial information, recommendations, monitoring data and results from user satisfaction surveys.

What outcomes have been identified?

The project has achieved/identified the following outcomes:

- ▶ It contributes to increasing the share of adults in lifelong education by offering flexible learning opportunities and resources to meet different needs and preferences.
- ▶ It fosters a culture of lifelong learning and adult education, with participants showing a high level of interest and engagement in project activities and resources (measured by satisfaction surveys and participation rates).
- ▶ It focuses on the inclusion of vulnerable groups, providing tailored information and support for low-skilled or low-income workers, migrants, and people with disabilities, who often face challenges in accessing education and training opportunities.
- ▶ It supports participants' education-to-work transitions by providing them with additional education, skills development, career guidance, and funding opportunities. The HZZ is not only a job provider, but a key public agent in facilitating lifelong learning and labour market integration.
- ▶ It conducts user satisfaction surveys to assess the project impact on employment, competencies, and career prospects.

What are the lessons learnt and success factors?

One of the challenges is engaging potential learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, who often lack information to enrol in a suitable programme. This is especially true for green skills, which are less attractive than digital skills for many users. The HZZ and other actors need to provide effective guidance and support to help people choose the right programme for their needs and aspirations.

Another challenge is to ensure that high-quality programmes are aligned with labour market demand. The HZZ needs a good legal framework that regulates the provision of voucher-based education (including accreditation of micro-credentials), as well as an online platform that allows users to browse, compare and apply for different programmes easily.

Success factors include: the availability of funding through vouchers that cover part or all of the cost of the programme; flexibility and accessibility of online learning; user-friendliness of the online platform, which provides an overview of the application process and Catalogue; and collaboration and communication between the HZZ and education providers to provide further information and guidance to users. These factors have increased learners' interest and participation in voucher-based education programmes, ultimately enhancing their employability and career prospects.



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