

4. YOUTH'S EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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This chapter explores shifts in educational trajectories and student well-being in Croatia and Slovenia before (2018), during, and after (2023) the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings indicate that participation in formal education remains high, particularly in Slovenia, with girls more often enrolled in graduate studies. However, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were disproportionately excluded from higher levels of education, with inequalities especially evident in Croatia at the primary and secondary levels. The pandemic negatively affected subjective well-being, most severely among girls and young people in lower levels of education. Stress levels were consistently high, with differing patterns across countries and education levels, and were strongly linked to diminished well-being and academic performance. During the pandemic, schools and universities acted as crucial support structures, partly mitigating adverse outcomes, yet disparities persisted post-pandemic. Educational aspirations remained generally strong, though shaped by gender and socioeconomic status, revealing both resilience and entrenched inequalities in youth education pathways.

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Over the past few decades, education has gained increasing global importance, driven by policies from organisations such as the United Nations, OECD, and the European Union. Their goals of promoting equitable access, improving quality to enhance the acquisition of knowledge and competencies, and fostering lifelong learning (see, for example, Europe 2020 strategy, 2010; Council of Europe, 2024) have spurred significant changes, notably the growth of secondary and tertiary education and recognition of non-formal and informal learning pathways. However, these trends were overshadowed by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly impacted people's lives and challenged the educational systems worldwide.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted education systems worldwide, leading to school closures, a rapid shift from traditional classroom settings to online learning, and impacting students' educational outcomes and trajectories across different social strata (Schleicher, 2020; Engel et al., 2023). While these effects were felt globally, the specific experiences of students varied across different countries and contexts.

This chapter examines how the pandemic affected education in two Central European countries – Slovenia and Croatia. By analysing data on students' educational experiences, well-being, and aspirations before, during, and after the pandemic in these two nations, we can gain insights into both the shared challenges faced by education systems as well as the unique ways different countries responded to and were impacted by this unprecedented crisis.

The chapter begins by outlining the characteristics of the high school and university student populations in Slovenia and Croatia at the time of our research, providing important context for understanding the subsequent findings. We then explore how effectively both countries' educational systems responded to students' needs during various phases of the pandemic and addressed students' well-being during the pandemic, in the context of the role of schools as a source of support.

The final section of the chapter examines the post-pandemic era, evaluating the extent to which the current educational system effectively addresses the evolving needs of students. It emphasises the educational aspirations of young individuals, offering insights into how their objectives and motivations may have shifted as a

result of the pandemic. This chapter synthesises the principal findings and offers practical recommendations for enhancing educational policy and support mechanisms under both regular and crisis conditions.

4.1 Youth inclusion in education in Slovenia and Croatia

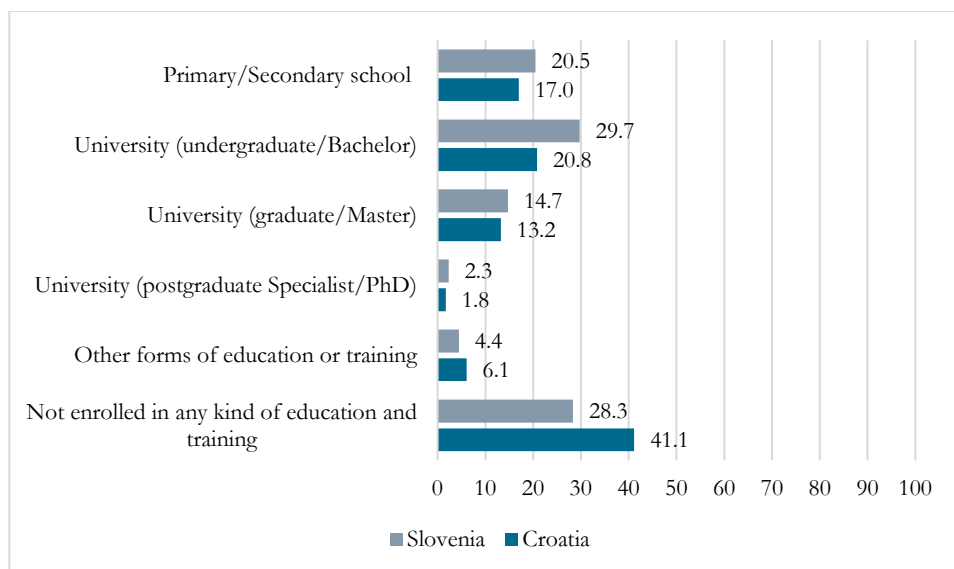
The latest OECD data (2024) show that Slovenia's enrolment rates in formal education remain among the highest compared to other EU member states: in 2022, Slovenia was placed 3rd in the 15-19 age group, with 94.8% enrolled, and 7th in the 20-29 age group, with 34.9% enrolled. Although tertiary education enrolment rates have been declining slowly by 2023 (SURS, 2024), the share of tertiary-educated young people in Slovenia continues to rise from a longitudinal perspective (Eurostat database, 2024). Thus, since 2014, the share of 25-34-year-olds with tertiary education has increased from 38.0% to 47.3% in 2022 and is above the EU-27 average (42%).

Croatia's enrolment rates in 2022 for the 15-19 age group were somewhat lower than those for Slovenia, with 85.8% enrolled, and the enrolment rate for the 20-29 age group in Croatia was 28.3%. Like Slovenia, Croatia also had an increased percentage of 25-34-year-olds with tertiary education. Since 2014, the share of 25-34-year-olds with tertiary education has increased from 30.8% to 36% in 2022, which is below the EU-27 average (42%).

In this study, YO-VID22: Youth Well-being and Support Structures Before, during, and After the COVID-19 Pandemic, our research samples consisted of 71.7% of youth included in some form of education in Slovenia, and 58.9% of youth included in some form of education in Croatia. In both countries, most of our respondents were enrolled in undergraduate university-level programmes (29.7% for Slovenia and 20.8% for Croatia), and the lowest share of the sample in both countries consisted of postgraduate students (below 3%). The detailed structure of the samples from both countries is shown in Figure 4.1.

The enrolment of young people in the education system differs by gender in the sample of young people from Slovenia ($\chi^2 = 11.845$; $p = 0.037$) and in the sample of young people from Croatia ($\chi^2 = 12.002$; $p = 0.035$). In Slovenia, a slightly higher proportion of boys attended primary and secondary education (57.8%), and

postgraduate studies (72.4%). In contrast, a slightly higher proportion of girls were enrolled in graduate studies (54.5%) and other forms of education and training (52.6%). Trends were similar in Croatia, where a slightly higher proportion of boys attended primary and secondary education (55.8%), and postgraduate studies (71.4%). In contrast, a slightly higher proportion of girls were enrolled in graduate studies (56.9%). Unlike in Slovenia, in Croatia, young men (59.5%) attend other forms of education and training.



Note: given that for the purposes of this chapter, the data on students aged 16 and over were analysed, the first category, the current educational status (primary/secondary school), primarily refers to secondary school. The research conducted in 2018 included 14-year-old students, and therefore, the specified item form was used.

Figure 4.1. Educational status of youth in Slovenia and Croatia in 2023 (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

The enrolment of young people in the education system differs in relation to socioeconomic status¹ (SES) both in the sample of young people from Slovenia ($\chi^2 = 51.507$; $p = 0.000$) and in the sample of young people from Croatia ($\chi^2 = 39.664$;

¹ As an indicator of the family's socio-economic status, the item "Which of the following best describes the financial situation in your household?" was used. This item was assessed on the scale: 1 - We don't have enough money for basic bills (e.g., electricity, heating) and food; 2 - We have enough for basic bills and food, but not for clothes and shoes; 3 - We have enough money for food, clothes and shoes, but not enough for more expensive things (e.g., refrigerator, TV); 4 - We can afford more expensive things, but not as expensive as a car or an apartment; 5 - We can afford everything we need for a good standard of living).

$p=0.001$). In Slovenia, young people with lower socioeconomic status are more likely to be enrolled in other forms of education or training. Differences in access to education are most noticeable at the postgraduate specialist or doctoral study level, in which only 3.3% of young people with lower socioeconomic status are included. Accordingly, the proportion of young people of lower socioeconomic status who do not attend any form of education or training is somewhat higher. In Croatia, young people with lower socioeconomic status are also more often outside the education system. Unlike in Slovenia, young people of lower socioeconomic status are somewhat more likely to be enrolled in postgraduate studies and other forms of education or training, which may indicate a more inclusive educational system, as it demonstrates greater sensitivity of the aforementioned levels of the education system to one of the most vulnerable groups of young people (youth with lower SES).

In both Slovenia and Croatia, there is an increasing trend in the share of tertiary-educated young people. There are still gender differences in involvement in certain forms of education and formal education, especially higher levels of education, which is still not equally accessible to young people from families of lower socioeconomic status.

4.2 Students' well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the well-being and mental health of students, as well as the educational process. During the pandemic, due to physical distancing and social restrictions, many students experienced increased anxiety, depression, and feelings of loneliness (Amerio et al., 2022; Li, 2022; Campos et al., 2024). The transition to online and remote learning has been challenging for many students, particularly because of their lack of structure, technical issues, inadequate learning space, and financial constraints. Social isolation has prevented the normal development of social skills and interpersonal relationships, which has particularly affected students at key stages of development (Gadermann, 2022). In our study, the well-being of young people was observed from the perspective of subjective well-being (SWB; Diener et al., 1999), which includes aspects of pleasant affect (happiness, joy, satisfaction, and pleasure), unpleasant affect (discomfort, sadness, fear, anger), loneliness, meaningful social relationships (feeling important to others, feeling supported by others), and the sense of meaning and purpose of

life. Young people assessed aspects of their well-being during and after the pandemic.

In Croatia and Slovenia, young people in the education system had significantly lower subjective well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic ($M_{Slovenia}=3.23$; $SD=.811$; $N=928$; $t=16.653$; $df=927$; $p<0.01$; $M_{Croatia}=3.28$; $SD=.757$; $N=719$; $t=14.60.01$) than those in the post-pandemic period ($M_{Slovenia}=3.62$; $SD=.752$; $N=928$; $M_{Croatia}=3.65$; $SD=.739$; $N=719$). Both countries confirmed this trend, with no significant differences in young people during the COVID-19 or post-pandemic periods. Figure 4.2. shows students' subjective well-being in both countries by gender.

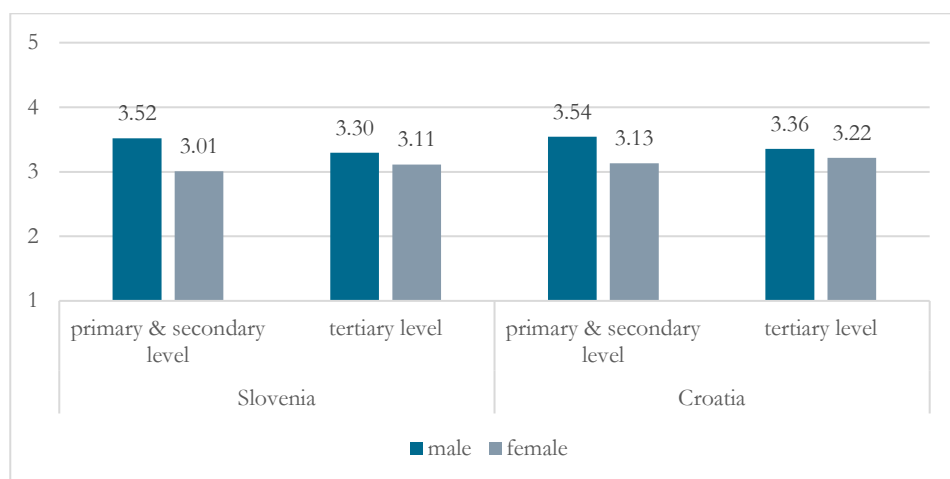


Figure 4.2. Students' Subjective Well-Being (mean scores) during the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovenia and Croatia by gender

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Statistically significant gender differences in the well-being of young people during the COVID-19 pandemic were found in both countries, with the differences being more pronounced at lower levels of education. In Slovenia, at the primary and secondary education levels, girls ($M=3.01$; $SD=.800$) reported significantly lower subjective well-being ($t=4.855$; $df=261$; $p=.000$) than boys ($M=3.52$; $SD=.875$). Although at the higher education level, gender differences were less pronounced, they were still statistically significant ($t=2.868$; $df=549$; $p=.004$), and girls also

reported lower levels of well-being ($M=3.11$; $SD=.777$) than boys ($M=3.30$; $SD=.784$). The same trend was observed in Croatia. Girls enrolled in primary and secondary education had statistically significantly lower subjective well-being ($M=3.13$; $SD=.815$) than boys ($M=3.54$, $SD=.726$; $t=3.830$; $df=204$; $p=.000$). As in Slovenia, at the level of higher education in Croatia, gender differences were also less pronounced but significant ($t=1.962$; $df=430$; $p=.050$), and girls also reported lower levels of well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic ($M=3.22$; $SD=.706$) than boys ($M=3.36$; $SD=.777$). These findings are consistent with those of other international studies (e.g., Mendolia et al., 2022; Christensen, 2024), which points to gender differences in coping with the pandemic in educational settings, with girls' well-being being more affected than that of boys.

We also analysed how the pandemic affected students' well-being in relation to their socioeconomic status. Figure 4.3. shows data for both Croatia and Slovenia.

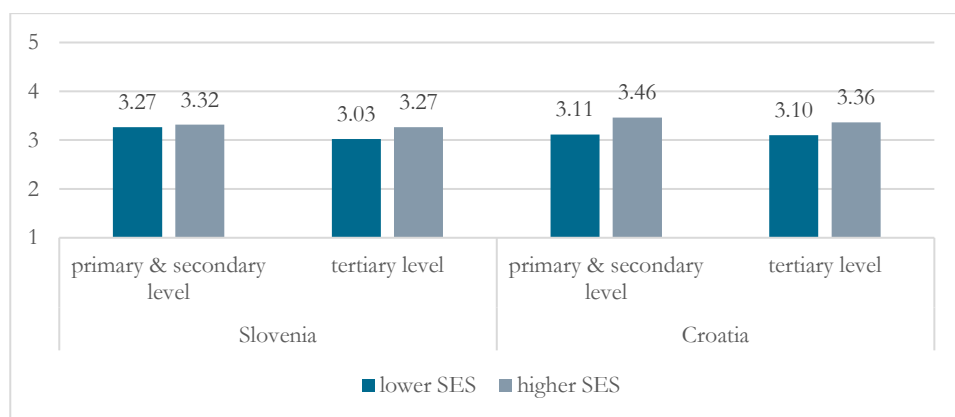


Figure 4.3. Students' Subjective Well-Being (mean scores) during the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovenia and Croatia by socio-economic status

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

In Slovenia, at the primary and secondary education levels, the well-being of young people during the COVID-19 pandemic was relatively stable, regardless of their socioeconomic status. At the higher education level, statistically significant differences in well-being were found ($t=3.363$; $df=598$; $p=.001$), with higher levels of well-being reported by young people of higher SES ($M=3.27$; $SD=.777$) compared with young people of lower SES ($M=3.03$; $SD=.778$). Statistically

significant differences in the well-being of young people in relation to socioeconomic status were present in the Croatian education system, both at the level of primary and secondary education ($t=2.974$; $df=204$; $p=.003$) and higher education level ($t=3.362$; $df=430$; $p=.001$). At the level of primary and secondary education, the well-being of young people during the COVID-19 pandemic was statistically significantly lower among young people coming from lower SES families ($M=3.11$; $SD=.693$) compared to young people coming from higher SES families ($M=3.46$; $SD=.810$). At the tertiary education level, the well-being of young people during the COVID-19 pandemic was statistically significantly lower among young people with lower SES ($M=3.10$; $SD=.723$) than among young people with higher SES ($M=3.36$; $SD=.777$).

These findings show that the impact of the pandemic was not equally felt across socioeconomic groups. Students from less affluent families reported more significant negative effects on their lives than their wealthier counterparts, highlighting the urgent need for targeted support for vulnerable populations.

“Well, I wouldn't agree that education suffered the most. I mean, maybe at the beginning, it didn't seem like anything, but later on, the professors got used to it, and online learning really has its advantages, but it can't replace a normal school. I think what suffered the most were actually friendships.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia).

“Since I was in the first year of high school, we didn't really get to know each other as a class. We came to school, more or less, we didn't know each other, and then I would say that what caught us the most was that we didn't even get to know each other properly, so we were in those online classes, and we hardly knew much about each other, and that's where maybe that got us down, but in those first years, later on, we managed to make up for it all and we still managed to connect at the class level.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

The pandemic has significantly disrupted the well-being of young people involved in the education system in both countries. Among the most vulnerable are girls, young people involved in lower levels of education, and young people from families of lower socio-economic status.

4.2.1 Youth well-being in the context of educational institutions

In Slovenia, 78.8% of young people estimate that their daily life at school (primary and secondary level) is difficult and stressful, while 76.7% estimate the same for daily life at university (tertiary level). In Croatia, 77.1% of young people enrolled in primary and secondary education assessed daily life at school as challenging and stressful, while 82.9% of young people enrolled in tertiary education assessed the same for their daily life at university. Among young people in Slovenia, a statistically significant negative correlation was found between students' subjective well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic and perceived levels of stress at school ($\rho = -.227$; $p < .001$) and at university ($\rho = -.215$; $p < .001$) with the subjective well-being of young people increasing as the perceived level of stress at school decreases. These trends were recorded among boys in primary and secondary education ($\rho = -.256$; $p < .001$), but not among girls. At the tertiary education level, these trends were recorded among both sexes, both boys ($\rho = -.202$; $p < .001$) and girls ($\rho = -.215$; $p < .001$). Unlike in Slovenia, in Croatia, despite the high perception of stress levels in everyday life at school and university, the above-mentioned results were not confirmed.

4.2.2 Correlation of youth well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic and academic achievement

In Slovenia, at the primary and secondary education levels, 23.7% of young people had sufficient or good academic performance, while 76.3% had very good or excellent academic performance. In comparison, at the primary and secondary education levels in Croatia, as many as 93.8% of the students had very good or excellent academic performance. At the tertiary education level in Slovenia, slightly more than one-fifth of young people (21.2%) achieved sufficient or good academic performance, while at the same level of education in Croatia, the share of young people who achieved lower academic performance was only 13.4%.

Among young people in Slovenia, a statistically significant positive correlation was found between students' subjective well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic and academic achievement ($\rho = .154$; $p < .001$) at the university level, and youth well-being increased as academic achievement increased. This trend was confirmed for both girls ($\rho = .162$; $p < .001$) and boys ($\rho = .175$; $p < .001$). At the primary and

secondary education levels, a significant positive correlation was found only for girls ($\rho=.276$; $p<.001$). Despite the high proportion of young people with high academic achievement in Croatia, the above trends were not confirmed.

4.2.3 Educational institutions as a source of support during the pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions in many countries have played an important role in supporting students' well-being and mental health. Some schools have implemented different programmes, such as social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed practices, to foster student resilience and a sense of belonging (Nadeem and Van Meter, 2023).

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of the youth's reflection on their educational experience during the pandemic.

“If you ask me, it was crazy. Extremely new and negative experience, ranging from family to school. /.../ The main problem within the context of education was transition from primary school to high school, which happened during the lockdown, or better say did not happen. How do I adjust to the new school environment? It was all so sudden, and we (young people) were all alone in this. /.../ During that time, it was hard for me, I had no motivation, bad grades in school time and nobody to turn to for support. But things got even worse after the pandemic, when we returned to school. So, the pandemic was over, and we were thrown back into the classrooms, again no transition, no support...”

(Female, high school student, Slovenia)

“Well, I think education suffered the most during the pandemic, because at the very beginning, we were, literally, not really worried about school at all because, the teachers were just sending us assignments and things like that and it wasn't like teaching at all. And, and after that, when we had already adapted and when the teachers themselves were figuring out how it should actually look, I think it was going in the right direction, but that was, I think we definitely lost about six months of teaching due to some, some lack of effort and dissatisfaction with the schooling itself. And I think that's reflected a lot now and that some things, for example, while we don't know in class, then that was, that was under the corona and things like that, so I think education suffered the most.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

In our research, we analysed the support provided by educational institutions for students in Slovenia and Croatia at different educational levels. The findings are shown in Figure 4.4.

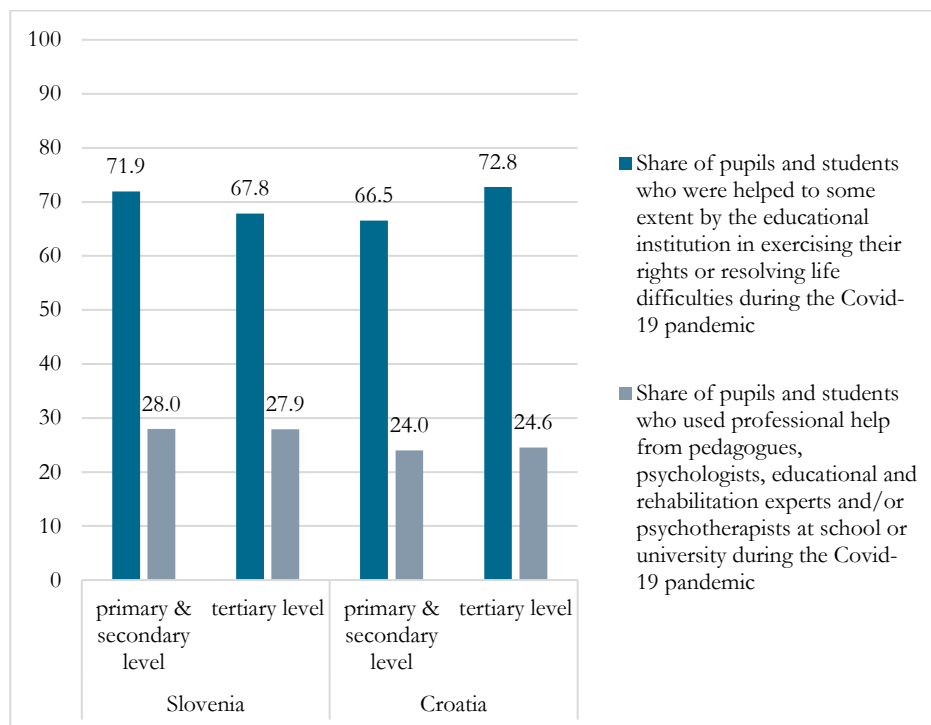


Figure 4.4: The share of pupils and students who, during the COVID-19 pandemic, used the support of an educational institution or an expert in the field of mental health at school or university (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

The school and university support use analyses showed no statistically significant differences between Croatia and Slovenia at the primary or university levels. However, a slightly higher proportion of students in Slovenia (in both primary and secondary schools) perceived greater support at the institutional level. In contrast, this was the case among university students in Croatia. No significant gender differences were found in Croatia or Slovenia at the tertiary level. In Croatia, at the primary and secondary school levels, boys were more likely than girls to perceive support from school ($\chi^2 = 8.008$; $p=0.005$). On the other hand, the results on expert

support showed no significant gender differences in the use of expert support in Croatia or Slovenia, regardless of whether the students were in primary or secondary school or university. In addition, there were no statistically significant differences between Croatia and Slovenia in terms of expert support usage at the primary school or university levels. However, the students in Slovenia tended to use educational expert assistance slightly more often.

The importance of educational institutions as a support system to young people can be illustrated with a quote from focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) which highlights the youth's reflection on their educational experience during the pandemic.

"I think that during the pandemic itself, what we missed the most was some support from, for example, the school pedagogue because she was already older and then it all turned out that way, she didn't understand technology, I think that kind of support was just to explain to us that we have to endure it now, what the measures are or something like that, just to introduce us to that world and how it will work now - I think we really missed that."

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

During the pandemic, more than three quarters of young people assessed everyday life at school or university as difficult and stressful, with the perceived level of stress significantly affecting students' well-being during the pandemic. In this context, the support of schools and higher education institutions was of utmost importance for the well-being of students.

4.3 Students' well-being in education in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected students' well-being in educational settings, leading to psychosocial, mental, and educational challenges. Addressing the needs of students' post-pandemic necessitates a systematic and multidimensional strategy that encompasses mental health support, social assistance, and adaptation of educational systems to the new realities imposed by the pandemic. We analysed student well-being variations during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in Croatia and Slovenia.

In both Slovenia and Croatia, young individuals within the education system exhibited significantly lower levels of subjective well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic (MSlovenia=3.23; SD=.811; N=928; $t=16.653$; $df=927$, $p<0.01$; MCroatia=3.28; SD=.757; N=719; $t=14.650$; $df=718$; $p<0.01$) than in the post-pandemic period (MSlovenia=3.62; SD=.752; N=928; MCroatia=3.65; SD=.739; N=719). This pattern was consistently observed in both countries, with no significant differences in the subjective well-being of young people during the COVID-19 pandemic or post-pandemic period. Figure 4.5. illustrates the mean scores of students' subjective well-being in the post-pandemic period in Slovenia and Croatia disaggregated by gender.

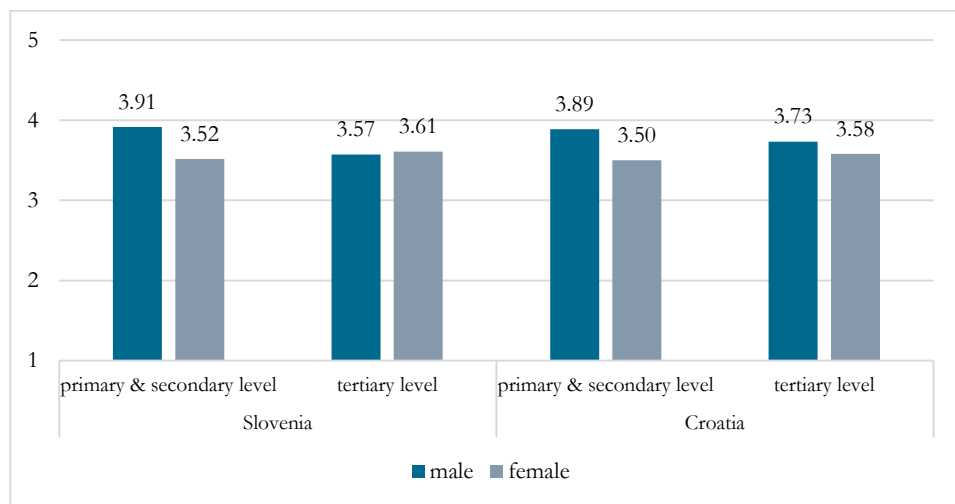


Figure 4.5: Students' Subjective Well-Being (mean scores) in the post-pandemic period in Slovenia and Croatia by gender

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

During the post-pandemic period, both Slovenia and Croatia demonstrated statistically significant gender differences in student well-being. These differences were particularly pronounced at lower educational levels, except among higher education students in Slovenia. In Slovenia, female students at the primary and secondary education levels ($M=3.52$; $SD=.785$) reported significantly lower subjective well-being than male students ($M=3.91$; $SD=.729$), as indicated by statistical analysis ($t=4.238$; $df=261$; $p=.000$). However, at the higher education level, gender differences were less pronounced and did not reach statistical significance.

In Croatia, female students in primary and secondary education also exhibited significantly lower subjective well-being ($M=3.50$; $SD=.785$) than their male counterparts ($M=3.89$; $SD=.736$), with statistically significant results ($t=3.648$; $df=204$; $p=.000$). Although gender differences were less pronounced at the higher education level in Croatia, they remained statistically significant ($t=2.244$; $df=430$; $p=.025$), and female students reported lower well-being ($M=3.58$; $SD=.739$) than male students ($M=3.73$; $SD=.690$). These findings are consistent with the existing literature on gender and well-being in education, which suggests that female students report lower subjective well-being than male students (Amerio et al., 2022; Campos et al., 2024).

We analysed the relationship between subjective well-being in the post-pandemic period and students' socioeconomic status in Slovenia and Croatia. The findings are presented in Figure 4.6.

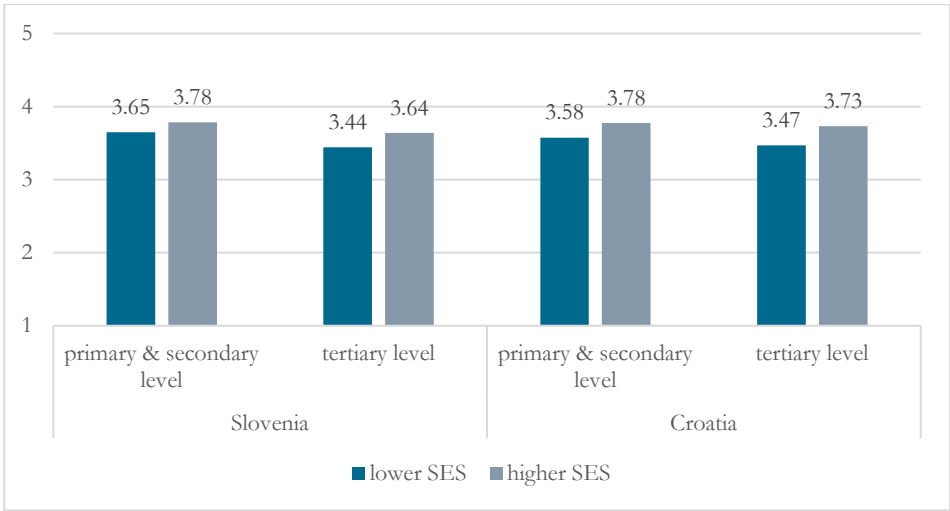


Figure 4.6: Students' Subjective Well-Being (mean scores) in the post-pandemic period in Slovenia and Croatia by socio-economic status
Source: YO-VID22, 2023

In the post-pandemic era, the well-being of young individuals in primary and secondary education in both Slovenia and Croatia has shown relative stability, irrespective of their socioeconomic backgrounds.

In the context of higher education, statistically significant differences in well-being were observed ($t=2.985$; $df=598$; $p=.003$), with young individuals from higher socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds reporting greater well-being ($M=3.64$; $SD=.721$) than their counterparts from lower SES backgrounds ($M=3.44$; $SD=.733$). Notably, significant disparities in well-being related to socioeconomic status were also evident within the Croatian higher education sector ($t=3.557$; $df=430$; $p=.000$). During the post-pandemic period, students from lower-SES families exhibited significantly lower well-being ($M=3.47$; $SD=.703$) than those from higher-SES families ($M=3.73$; $SD=.712$). These findings corroborate the thesis that the pandemic has intensified pre-existing educational inequalities (Schleicher, 2020; Gee et al., 2023).

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups ($N=100$; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of the youth's reflection on their educational experience in the post-pandemic period.

"I think the pandemic has taught us a lot of new things. Especially now in high school, where there are a lot of students from all over the county, and some are not from the county, and I think that's one thing that we actually, before the corona, we were doing some live projects and a lot of time was wasted, and I think that, actually, I kind of liked that part of the corona because we learned some new things that we hadn't even thought about before, but we definitely missed that, socializing in person, and when we went back to school, those masks were kind of the worst, especially in those summer months when it was 28 degrees in school, wearing a mask and those partitions, but somehow we survived that. Now, I don't know, the corona had almost no effect, I barely remember what it was like now, actually, I only have some good, good memories, socialising and that."

(Male, high school student, Croatia)

"I think Covid taught us, well me at least, that online connections are not the same as the real world social connections. We need other people, living people."

(Male, high school student, Slovenia)

4.3.1 Youth well-being in the post-pandemic period in the context of educational institutions

In Slovenia, 78.8% of young individuals perceived their daily experiences in primary and secondary education as challenging and stressful, while 76.7% reported similar sentiments regarding their daily experiences at the tertiary level. In Croatia, 77.1% of young individuals enrolled in primary and secondary education considered their daily school life challenging and stressful, whereas 82.9% of those enrolled in tertiary education expressed the same assessment of their daily university life.

In a study of young individuals in Slovenia, a statistically significant negative correlation was identified between students' subjective well-being during the post-pandemic period and their perceived stress levels at both school ($\rho = -.298$; $p < .01$) and university ($\rho = -.211$; $p < .01$). Notably, the subjective well-being of these young individuals improved as perceived stress at school diminished. This pattern was observed among both male ($\rho = -.253$; $p < .01$) and female ($\rho = -.219$; $p < .05$) students enrolled in primary and secondary education.

At the tertiary education level, these trends were observed among both male ($\rho = -.265$; $p < .01$) and female students ($\rho = -.161$; $p < .01$). In contrast to Slovenia, despite the high perception of stress levels in daily academic life in Croatia, the aforementioned trends were not confirmed.

4.3.2 Correlation between youth well-being in the post-pandemic period and academic achievement

In Slovenia, a significant proportion of young individuals, 76.3%, at the primary and secondary education levels, achieved very good or excellent academic performance, while 23.7% attained sufficient or good performance. In contrast, in Croatia, a remarkable 93.8% of students at these educational levels demonstrated very good or excellent academic performance. At the tertiary education level in Slovenia, slightly more than one-fifth (21.2%) of young individuals achieved sufficient or good academic performance. Conversely, in Croatia, at the same educational level, only 13.4% of young individuals exhibited lower academic performance.

In Slovenia, a statistically significant positive correlation was identified between university students' subjective well-being in the post-pandemic period and academic achievement ($\rho=.152$; $p<.01$). This correlation indicates that as academic achievement increased, students' well-being increased. This pattern was observed in both female ($\rho=.112$; $p<.01$) and male students ($\rho=.191$; $p<.01$). In contrast, in Croatia, although a substantial proportion of young individuals exhibited high academic achievement, a significant positive correlation was evident only among university-level students ($\rho=.106$; $p<.05$). Such trends were not apparent at the primary and secondary education levels.

4.3.3 School as a source of support in the post-pandemic period

In the preceding section, we analysed how students used the support of educational institutions or experts in schools and universities during the pandemic. However, we were also interested in comparing this practice with that of the post-pandemic period. The results are shown in Figure 4.7.

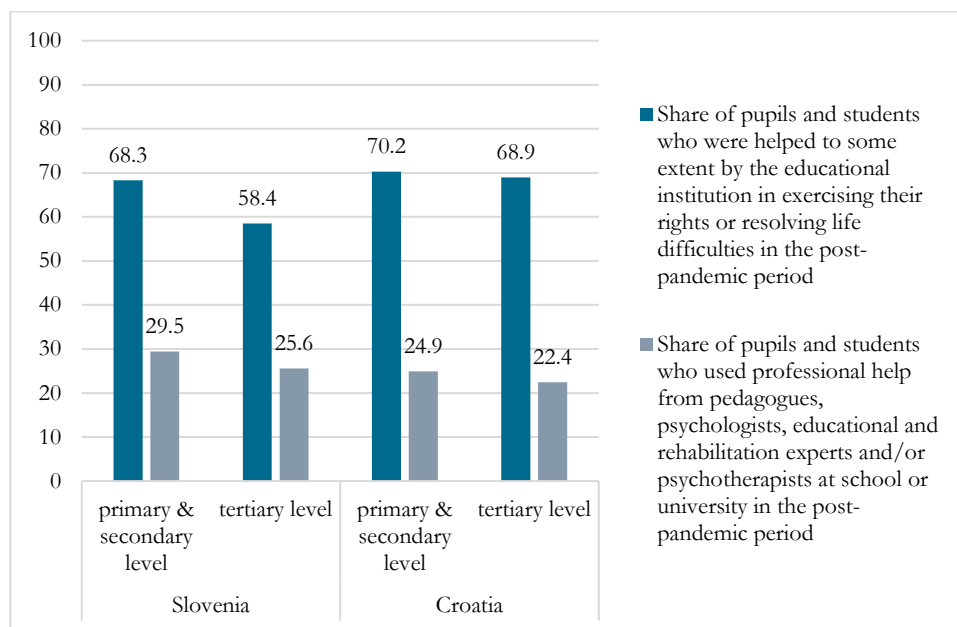


Figure 4.7: Share of pupils and students who used the support of an educational institution or an expert in the field of mental health at school or university in the post-pandemic period (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

We also examined gender disparities in accessing the aforementioned support. Concerning the utilisation of school or university support at the primary and secondary education levels, no statistically significant gender differences were identified in Croatia and Slovenia when using school support. Male and female students reported comparable levels of institutional support across these educational stages. However, gender-based differences emerged between the two countries at the tertiary level. In Slovenia, female university students were more likely than their male counterparts to perceive institutional support from their universities ($\chi^2=5.696$; $p=0.017$). Conversely, no significant gender differences were observed in Croatia's perception of university support.

The analysis of professional assistance utilisation revealed no statistically significant gender differences in engagement with expert support across all educational levels in Croatia and Slovenia. This finding is consistent across primary, secondary, and tertiary education in both nations. Both male and female students accessed professional support at comparable rates irrespective of their educational stage.

As the previous sections demonstrated inequalities in well-being and educational experiences, this analysis of aspirations provides further insight into the potential long-term impacts of the pandemic on educational trajectories and outcomes.

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of the youth's reflection on their experiences and perception of educational institutions as a source of support in the post-pandemic period.

“Well, I would also agree that we don't really have any kind of support, that it's very difficult, uh, to find someone, some kind of expert in these moments of crisis since it's widespread today. (...) one person can't reach a professor, let alone negotiate with all the professors, which I understand, but also, let's say, the fact that you don't have any support, in that real sense, that's very bad because there are many, many people who have very great potential, who could do great things for themselves and for society, but they simply don't have the appropriate support and I wouldn't just say that for my faculty, but in general in Croatia, there's not too much focus on that.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

“I think we should be able to talk to the homeroom teacher during those class periods. Most of the time, we are either let go or we just don't do anything, and then the whole point of the whole form time is lost. There, we should maybe talk about the problems we have or have homeroom teachers come to us or offer some advice. And then when we don't have that class period, we don't have the opportunity to tell them.

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

In the aftermath of the pandemic, despite students reporting better subjective well-being, they continue to experience high levels of stress and difficulties at school and in higher education institutions, and therefore support and assistance aimed at all young people, especially the most vulnerable groups, is still needed.

The following section analyses data on students' educational aspirations in Slovenia and Croatia, comparing pre-pandemic and post-pandemic trends. It examines how factors like gender and socioeconomic status influence aspirations, and whether the pandemic has altered young people's educational goals.

4.4 Educational aspirations of youth in Croatia and Slovenia

The pandemic has influenced young people's educational aspirations. Research indicates that while some students' aspirations have been affected by the challenges faced during the pandemic, others have shown resilience and a committed focus on their educational goals. In our research, we were especially interested in youth aspirations about higher education because they are central to modern youth identities. Thus, it is unsurprising that their educational aspirations were generally high since around two-thirds of Slovenian youth (73.7%) wanted to acquire a university degree (Figure 4.9). Similar indicators were found in Croatia, where over 60% of young people (63.2%) aspire to obtain a higher education degree. In contrast to Slovenia, where one-fourth of young people want to finish high school, Croatia's share is slightly higher (35.6%). Figure 4.8 shows the educational aspirations of youth in Slovenia and Croatia in the post-pandemic period.

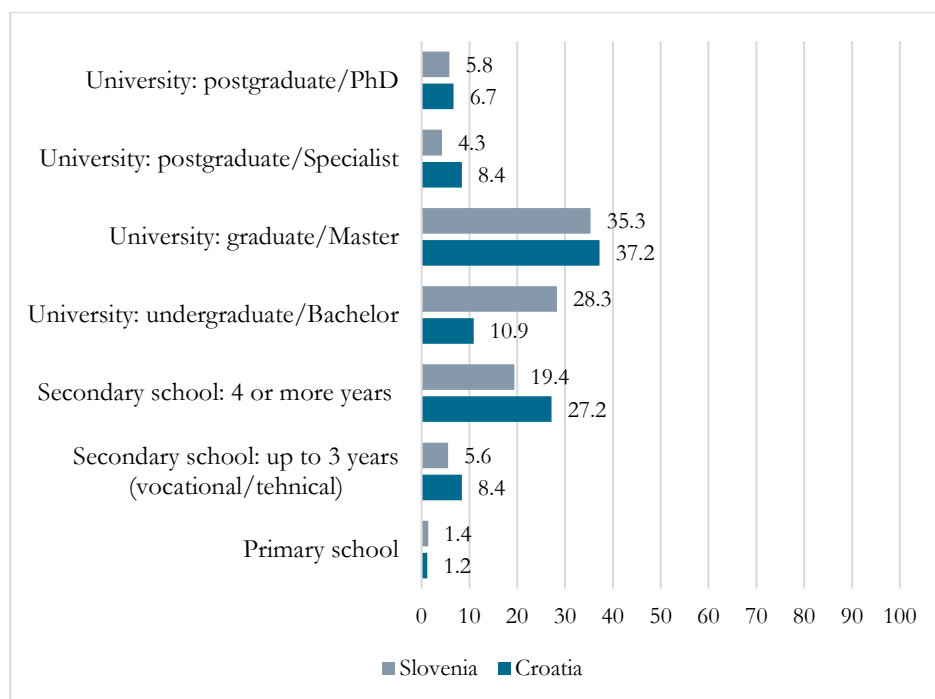


Figure 4.8. Educational aspirations of Slovenian and Croatian young people in the post-pandemic period (2023) (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

4.4.1 Aspirational trends among young people in Slovenia and Croatia in the pre-pandemic (2018) and post-pandemic (2023) period

Compared to before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, young people's educational aspirations in Croatia are relatively stable. There was a difference in aspirations in Slovenia in the post-pandemic period compared with the pre-pandemic period ($\chi^2 = 36.799$; $p = 0.000$). There has been an increase in the proportion of young people whose highest desired level of education is four-year secondary school (from 12.8% in the pre-pandemic period to 19.4% in the post-pandemic period). In comparison, there has been a decrease in the proportion of young people who want to complete postgraduate specialist studies (from 7.1% in the pre-pandemic period to 4.3% in the post-pandemic period) and postgraduate doctoral studies (from 10.3% in the pre-pandemic period to 5.8% in the post-pandemic period).

Between 2018 and 2023, there was a shift towards more practical and intermediate educational goals, particularly in specialist and secondary schools. At the same time, aspirations for Master's and PhD degrees have declined, suggesting a growing awareness of their time, cost, and perceived return on investment.

4.4.2 Students' gender and educational aspirations

In Slovenia and Croatia, statistically significant gender differences in young people's aspirations were found (χ^2 Slovenia=29.598; $p=0.00$; χ^2 Croatia=36.409; $p=0.00$). In both countries, girls had higher educational aspirations than boys did. In Slovenia, boys were significantly more likely to complete three years (7.8% of boys, compared to 3.1% of girls) and four- or five-year secondary school (21.5% of boys, compared to 16.9% of girls) as the highest level of education. Gender differences are not present in aspirations at the undergraduate level. However, girls are significantly more likely than boys to obtain a higher education diploma, more precisely, to complete a graduate study (Master's; 41.1% of girls, compared to 30% of boys). Gender differences are also not present at the postgraduate specialist and postgraduate doctoral studies levels. Similar trends in the educational aspirations of girls and boys have also been observed in Croatia. In Croatia, 52.8% of girls wanted to complete higher education compared to 43.6% of boys. Unlike girls, boys in Croatia were significantly more likely to choose three years (11.2% of boys, compared to 5.4% of girls) and four- or five-year secondary schools as the highest level of education (31.5% of boys, compared to 22.6% of girls). Girls (17.5%) aspire to complete postgraduate specialist or doctoral studies at the highest level of education more often than boys (13%) do.

These findings align with international research on gender differences in educational aspirations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several studies have examined how gender influences educational aspirations of adolescents and young adults, which reveal nuanced and context-dependent patterns across countries and educational systems. In the UK, Hartas (2023) found that girls, particularly those from vulnerable groups, were more likely than boys to aspire to post-16 education, especially academic tracks such as A-levels. A similar trend was observed in Italy (Bozzato, 2023), where girls expressed more hope and concern about their future than did boys. These differences were associated with greater self-efficacy and perceived academic success among female students, suggesting that emotional and cognitive

engagement in school life remains gendered in the post-pandemic context (Bozzato, 2023). In addition, researchers in Finland found that girls were more inclined to pursue academic education, whereas boys tended to prefer vocational pathways (Laurell et al., 2022).

4.4.3 Students' socio-economic differences and educational aspirations

Research on differences in educational aspirations based on socioeconomic status consistently shows that students from higher SES backgrounds tend to have higher educational and career aspirations than those from lower SES backgrounds; students from low SES families are less likely to set high educational goals, often due to limited access to resources, role models, and career guidance, which contributes to an "aspirations gap" (Sirin, 2005; Thapliyal & Joshi, 2014; Burger & Mortimer, 2021).

In other words, their families' socioeconomic status greatly influences young people's educational aspirations. The share of young people with the lowest socioeconomic status (do not have enough money for basic bills and food/have enough money for basic bills and food, but not for clothes and shoes) in Slovenia and Croatia is 7%. The share of young people with enough money for food, clothes, and shoes, but not enough for more expensive things (fridges, TV, etc.) in Slovenia is 23%, and in Croatia it is 27%. The share of young people living in families that can afford more expensive things, but not expensive things such as a car or an apartment, is 46% in Slovenia and 53% in Croatia, while the share of young people with the highest socioeconomic status (who can afford everything they need for a good standard of living) is 17% in Slovenia and 20% in Croatia. In both countries, statistically significant differences in the educational aspirations of young people were found in relation to socio-economic status (χ^2 Slovenia=76.120; $p=0.00$; χ^2 Croatia=59.227; $p=0.00$), with educational aspirations of young people generally increasing with higher socio-economic status. In Slovenia, the educational aspirations of young people with the lowest socioeconomic status most often remain at the level of completing four-year secondary school (34%), followed by undergraduate studies (Bachelor's, 27.7%), graduate studies (Master's, 16%), three-year secondary school (10.6%), and primary school (5.3%). In contrast, the educational aspirations of young people with the highest socioeconomic status are directed towards higher levels of education. As many as 43.1% of young people with the highest socio-economic status aspire to complete graduate studies (Master's), and

28.7% aspire to complete undergraduate studies (Bachelor's). In comparison, 13.4% aspire to complete postgraduate studies (specialist or doctoral). In Croatia, slightly more than half of young people from the lowest socioeconomic status (52.3%) plan to complete secondary school as the highest level of education, 16.3% a three-year school, and 36% a four-year school, while almost 5% of young people from the lowest socioeconomic status do not plan to continue their education after completing primary school (4.7%). Slightly more than a third of young people from the lowest socioeconomic status would like to complete an undergraduate degree (Bachelor's degree, 9.3%) or a graduate degree (Master's degree, 24.4%). Like Slovenia, the educational aspirations of young people from the highest socioeconomic status are directed towards higher levels of education. 45.8% of them plan to complete an undergraduate degree (Bachelor's, 9.2) or a graduate degree (Master's, 36.6%), while 21% aspire to complete a postgraduate degree (specialist, doctoral).

These results are in line with international research, which shows that socioeconomic status strongly shapes educational aspirations. Higher SES is associated with greater access to resources and support, leading to higher aspirations and academic achievement, whereas lower SES students face multiple barriers that reduce their educational ambitions.

Although educational aspirations of students in Croatia are relatively stable, in Slovenia, compared to the pre-pandemic period, there are higher aspirations of students towards more practical and intermediate educational goals. Gender and socioeconomic inequalities in access to education for young people are still present and need to be addressed.

4.5 Conclusions and recommendations

The findings from the pre-pandemic (2018) and post-pandemic (2023) periods highlight important shifts in the educational trajectories of young people in both Slovenia and Croatia. It also points to elements of youth resilience in times of crisis and the effectiveness of educational institutions' responses to youth needs during challenging times. The main findings are:

- Young people's participation in formal education, particularly tertiary education, remains high compared to the EU rates, especially in Slovenia. In both countries, there was a prevalence of girls enrolled in graduate studies. Moreover, both countries register differences in access to education for students from families with lower socioeconomic status, who are more often outside the education system. In Croatia, in comparison to Slovenia, postgraduate education and other forms of education or training are more accessible to the most vulnerable young people.
- The COVID-19 pandemic had a measurable and nuanced impact on both countries' educational outcomes and students' well-being. During the pandemic, the most impaired subjective well-being was among young people enrolled in lower levels of education (primary and secondary education), especially among girls. In both countries, students from less-affluent families reported more significant negative effects on their lives, especially those enrolled in tertiary education. In Croatia, these inequalities are present at both primary and secondary levels, highlighting the urgent need for targeted support for vulnerable populations.
- There is a high level of perceived stress related to school or high school among young people in Croatia and young people in Slovenia, with the perceived level of stress being somewhat higher among young people in primary and secondary education in Croatia and young people in tertiary education in Slovenia. Among young people in Slovenia, the perceived stress level is negatively correlated with subjective well-being at all levels of education, especially among boys with lower levels of education. Lower subjective well-being was also associated with lower academic achievement, particularly among girls in primary and secondary education.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, the education system served as a source of support for young people, especially at the primary and secondary levels in Slovenia and tertiary levels in Croatia. The support of educational experts was equally available to both girls and boys, regardless of the education level. These findings confirm the supportive role of school in the lives of young people, which has somewhat mitigated the negative consequences of changed living and schooling conditions, difficult times, and uncertainty during the pandemic.
- In the post-pandemic period, there were still significant differences in student well-being. Especially vulnerable are girls in primary and secondary education

and students from lower socioeconomic status in tertiary education, which indicates that the pandemic has exacerbated existing educational inequalities. Lower levels of well-being are associated with perceived difficulty and stress in everyday life at school/high school, and lower academic achievement. In both countries, at the primary, secondary, and tertiary education levels, continuous institutional and professional support is available to students, which is extremely important for their mental health, especially for the most vulnerable groups of students.

- Students' educational aspirations were generally high in both the countries. While young people's educational aspirations in Croatia are relatively stable compared to the pre-pandemic period, Slovenia has shifted towards more practical and intermediate educational goals, particularly in specialist and secondary schools. In both countries, girls had higher educational aspirations than boys did. In the post-pandemic period, students' educational aspirations were still shaped by their socioeconomic status, whereby students from lower SES backgrounds still faced multiple barriers.

To conclude, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant and nuanced impact on students' educational experiences and well-being in Croatia and Slovenia. While both countries maintained high levels of educational participation, the pandemic exacerbated inequalities, particularly affecting girls and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Mental health challenges and increased stress levels are prevalent, although educational institutions provide important support. In the post-pandemic period, some disparities in well-being and aspirations persisted, highlighting the need for targeted interventions. Moving forward, strengthening support systems, promoting inclusivity, enhancing mental health services, and preparing for future crises. Continuous research is essential to monitor students' well-being, educational outcomes, and aspirations, providing a comprehensive understanding of their evolving needs. These data should inform policy decisions and guide the design of targeted interventions that effectively support students' development and success. By implementing data-driven policies and fostering high aspirations for all students, the education systems in Croatia and Slovenia can work towards creating more equitable, supportive, and resilient learning environments that meet the evolving needs of youth in a post-pandemic world.

Based on these findings, several key policy recommendations have emerged to guide future research and initiatives within the education system. These include enhancing student support systems, promoting inclusivity and equity in education, improving access to mental health and career guidance services, and using data-driven approaches to inform policies and practices. Together, these strategies aim to create a supportive, inclusive, and effective educational environment for all learners.

- Provide targeted support for vulnerable student groups. It is imperative to enhance academic and mental health support services for female students, particularly those in primary and secondary education, to foster well-being and academic achievement. Furthermore, initiatives should be implemented to assist students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds by focusing on improving their access to higher education opportunities.
- Address educational inequalities. Strategies should be formulated to enhance educational access and educational experience for students from vulnerable groups (e.g., lower socioeconomic backgrounds, migrants, special needs, etc.) by addressing obstacles they encounter. These initiatives should encompass financial assistance, mentoring, and career guidance to create equitable opportunities and ensure that all students receive the support and resources necessary to achieve academic and professional success.
- Enhance mental health and well-being support. Expanding mental health services and resources within educational institutions, including schools and universities, is necessary to enhance students' well-being. Furthermore, educators and staff must receive training to identify stress indicators and provide appropriate support to foster a more responsive and supportive educational environment.
- Strengthen institutional support systems. Maintaining and enhancing support structures established during the pandemic is essential to ensure their ongoing effectiveness and accessibility. These services must be equitably accessible to all students, regardless of gender or socioeconomic status, to promote inclusivity and provide consistent support throughout the educational system.
- Foster high educational aspirations. Ensuring that all students have access to comprehensive career counselling and detailed information about higher education opportunities is crucial for enabling them to make informed decisions regarding their future paths. In addition, the creation of mentorship

programmes is vital for linking students with role models from a variety of backgrounds, thereby offering essential guidance, inspiration, and support throughout their academic and professional development.

- Address gender disparities in educational goals. Educational systems should actively promote the engagement of female students in STEM disciplines, while simultaneously encouraging male students to consider a wider array of educational and career opportunities. To accomplish this objective, it is imperative to address and dismantle the gender stereotypes present in career guidance and educational resources, thereby cultivating a more inclusive and equitable environment for all students.
- Prepare for future crises. Educational institutions are encouraged to establish robust online and hybrid learning systems to ensure continuity of education under all circumstances.
- Promote justice and equity in education. Educational policies and practices should be inclusive of all students, regardless of their background or circumstances, to promote equity and access for everyone. To support this goal, teachers must receive training in inclusive educational practices, social and emotional competences and diversity issues, enabling them to create supportive and effective learning environments for diverse student populations.

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