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Academics' Self-Assessment Regarding the Mastery of the Academic Profession Competencies

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Abstract
The academic profession is faced with many changes and challenges in the social context, which are related to the requirements for (re)defining the existing and introducing new competencies. The main aim of the research presented in this paper is to examine the participants' self-assessments regarding the mastery of the academic profession competencies at the beginning of senior academic career. The research method applied in this research was an online survey, and the research instrument used was a survey questionnaire. The data was analysed with the use of the Statistical Package IBM SPSS Statistics 20.0. The research was conducted on a sample of 1130 research participants (682 senior academics and 448 junior academics) from seven public universities in Croatia. The evaluation scale contained 45 items - academic profession competencies. Research results have shown that four of the main five competencies in terms of the self-assessment regarding the mastery level are from the group of general academic competencies which are not related to the traditional academic activities - teaching or research. Research participants assessed that the competencies they have mastered the least, are the ones related to universities' third mission and leadership activities.

Keywords
Academic profession; competencies; Croatian academics; self-assessment; mastery of the academic profession competencies.

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Introduction

In the last few decades, there has been strong correlation between the changes in the social context and the transformation of academic affairs and activities. Teaching and research as the core of the academic profession are becoming merely a segment of a wider scope of activities. Academics and higher education institutions are in continuous interaction with the stakeholders: students and their parents, the business sector and the labour market as well as public and private institutions. Purcell (2008) notes that the social expectations from the academics entail their 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; promotion of equal opportunities and access to higher education. In such conditions, academics are expected to develop new competencies that would enable them to comply with the new requirements and to undertake new tasks (Musselin, 2007). Authors (Neave, 1983; Altbach, 2000; Kelly & Murphy, 2007; Ledić, 2012; Ehlers, 2020) suggest that the (new) requirements the academics need to fulfill in addition to teaching and research, as core academic activities, are mostly multidimensional and sometimes contradictory. As a result of the (new) changes, academic profession has been confronted with the need of redefining and developing (new) competencies which are considered significant and essential in academic work.

Traditional academic activities - teaching and research - are regarded as the most important within the academic promotion criteria and have been the subject of numerous research studies (Braxton 1993, Kuh & Hu, 2001; Brew, 2006; Locke & Teichler, 2007). From a quantitative perspective, most of the research was focused on the discussions about teaching competencies in the academic profession (Inlow 1956; Elton, 1992; Knight, 1995; Rychen & Salganik 2003; Henard & Roseveare, 2012). Recent research studies (Kreber, 2007; Marton, 2007; Donaldson, 2013; Abykanova at all, 2016) suggest that the 21st century teachers, regardless of educational level, must enable future generations to make progress in an environment of rapid, lasting and fundamental changes. In addition to the aforementioned studies, projects and recommendations at the level of the European educational policies (for example: DeSeCo project (OECD, 2005), TALIS research, *Common European Principles for Teacher Competency and Qualifications* (2004), EFFECT project – European Forum for Enhanced Collaboration in Teaching (EUA, 2018), Paris Communique (2018), Rome

Communique (2020)), indicate a wide range of teaching responsibilities and competencies deemed indispensable for the academics in terms of teaching. In that context, it is crucial to emphasise that the policy path defined by Paris Communique (2018) is strongly devoted to student-cantered learning, work-based learning, interdisciplinarity and fostering digital skills and competencies. Following the signpost defined two years ago, Rome Communique (2020) Anex III has given Recommendations to National Authorities for the Enhancement of Higher Education Learning and Teaching in the EHEA. The recommendations underlines the following: "to make a student-centered learning a reality, to foster continuous enhancement of teaching and to strengthen higher education institutions' and systems' capacity to enhance learning and teaching." (p. 3-4).

Although research competencies haven't been represented in literature as much as teaching competencies, they too have been discussed. *Skills and competencies needed in the research field objectives* 2020 (2010) is a document which highlights significant changes that are taking place in the European research area. Powerful globalization pressures, increased openness of the research market, a strong mobility trend among researchers, insistence on the increased interdisciplinarity and cooperation among various research teams, as well as political investments in research and innovation, are merely several factors that influence changes in the European research policies. Likewise, UNESCO World Report - *Towards Knowledge Societies* (2005), in the chapter on research and the relationship between research and the wider community, raises the issue of intellectual property and highlights the disparities in research fields, as well as broadening and almost complete disappearance of research information boundaries and the development of new research fields. As a consequence of dealing with such changes, the question regarding the knowledge, skills and abilities that characterize an exceptional researcher has been raised.

Requirements for the development of new academic competencies, in addition to teaching and research, have begun appearing in line with the changes in the academic profession. This mainly refers to the competencies deriving from the development of the universities' third mission (Boyer, 1990; Macfarlane, 2005, 2007; Ćulum & Ledić, 2010). The debates are focused on the analysis and better understanding of relationships and various modalities of cooperation between universities and the context within which they function. Most authors agree that the concept of the third mission explores the role of the university and its contribution to the local, regional and national development

(Goddard & Chatterton, 2003; Arbo & Benneworth, 2006; Benneworth & Hospers, 2007). Third mission competencies are firmly related to the concept of service learning, which is one of the applications of experiential learning theory. Experiential learning theory might be perceived as "...a holistic model of the learning process and a multi-linear model of adult development" (Baker, Jensen & Kolb, 2002, p. 51). According to Zhou & Brown (2005), experiential learning theory is understood as an inclusive model of adult learning that aims to explain the complexities of and differences between adult learners within a single framework. Baker, Jensen & Kolb (2002) pointed out that the focus of this theory is experience, which serves as the essential driving force in learning. Zhou & Brown (2005, 54) defines service learning as "a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities with the emphasis on meeting community needs.". Discussions on service learning in academic community are primarily related to academic service learning. Mikelić Preradović & Boras (2006, p. 293) has defined academic service learning as a "teaching methodology that utilizes community service as a means of helping students gain a deeper understanding of course objectives, acquire new knowledge, develop their academic skills and engage in civic activity.". Furthermore, the authors mentioned above emphasised that academic service learning provides experiential opportunities for students to learn by engaging in structured service activities. Additionally, academic service-learning benefit the student, as the service activities are designed so that they are directly connected to the course learning outcomes and becoming a hands-on learning experience. For lecturers, it provides competencies, information and organisational help necessary to carry out a service that meets a real community need (Mikelić Preradović & Boras, 2006).

In research studies, leadership competencies in higher education represent the fourth set of academic profession competencies (Hoff, 1999; Spendlove, 2007; Davila Quintana, Mora Ruiz & Vila Ladós, 2011). The discussions with reference to this group of competencies have shown that the leadership competencies in higher education are regarded as highly significant in the academic context. From the initial exclusive focus on the heads 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. According to Gonzalez's (2004, in: Shahmnadi et all, 2011) discussion on leadership competencies in higher education, academics should be

equipped with: 1) personal characteristics and skills, 2) administrative competencies, 3) competencies of social responsibility, and 4) institutional competencies. Personal characteristics and skills include flexibility, anxiety control, time management, adaptive management, positive attitude toward people, innovative, motivating, honest, diplomatic, visionary and entrepreneurial spirit. Administrative competencies included decision-making, delegation, exploring alternatives, financial and administrative competencies, teamwork, communication, visioning, planning, negotiating, conflict resolution, evaluation, knowledge management, networking, marketing project management, and response capacity. Competencies of social responsibility include social commitment, sensitivity to cultural diversity, analysis of demands, and knowledge of economic situation, and institutional competencies. These include institutional identity and philosophy, and leadership (Yang, 2005 in: Shahmnadi et all, 2011). In academic career, authors mostly distinguished two different stages – junior and senior academics (Locke & Teichler, 2007). In the national (Croatian) context and according to national legislation documents, junior academics are teaching assistants, PhD students and postdocs, while senior academics are assistant, associate, full and tenured professors.

Comprehensive research studies on the academic profession competencies are scarce among the Croatian researchers. In the last few years, however, many research studies that examine this issue have increased (Turk & Ledić, 2016). The topic of academic profession competencies was previously predominantly focused on the group of teaching competencies. Discussions by various authors (Kalin, 2004; Vizek Vidović, 2009) can be reduced to two key challenges: the need to revise the legislative framework regarding the academic promotion procedures, which would result in equal appraisal of their teaching and research work; and the need to invest in the academic development programmes.

In the context of research competencies, studies (Brajdić Vuković, 2013) examine the position and academic promotion of junior researchers and deal with the issue of research competencies among junior researchers in a wider context. Particular consideration is given to the lack of a formal system of support for the development of research competencies as well as their overall professional development.

The research regarding the academics' third mission competencies predominantly aims to introduce the concept of third mission into the national research area (Ćulum & Ledić, 2010), explore academics' attitudes regarding the third mission (Ćulum & Ledić,

2011) and, in a somewhat wider context, social dimensions in higher education (Puzić, Doolan & Dolenec, 2006; Farnell & Kovač, 2010). Leadership competencies in higher education are represented in the context of discussions on the governance in higher education (Kovač, Ledić & Rafajac, 2002, 2007) and, to a lesser extent, analyses and discussions on the quality of the management systems in higher education (Lazibat, 2005).

The expectations set before the academic profession represent a research challenge in terms of structuring and operationalization of the academic profession competencies. In that context, it is necessary to take into account not only the particularities of individual competence approaches specific to a particular profession, but also the particularities of the national contexts and conditions in which that profession is being developed and practised. At the same time, the current trends in the educational policies in the European and national context reveal that the Croatian academics will likewise be expected to meet the requirements for the development of a (new) set of competencies. For instance, in the national research area, a document entitled *Strategy for Education, Science and Technology* (2013, 108) emphasizes that the role of academics in society has changed and that it includes "...four segments of activities: teaching (educational); research/artistic; organizational, managerial and professional activities in the academic bodies; engagement in the third mission of higher education institutions (activities aimed at contributing to the development and improvement of the community)". In this context, the question of comprehensive research studies on competencies of the academic profession becomes a question *par excellence* in the academic community in Croatia.

The discussions on academic profession competencies haven't been in Croatian researchers' focus of interest. The literature review illustrates that the authors devote attention to the differences among the academic profession ranks, especially to the differences between junior and senior academics, the complexity of their responsibilities and job descriptions (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 could be assumed that it is not possible to speak of a unique set of competencies that would apply to all academic ranks.

Methodology

The aim of this paper is to examine the self-assessment on mastery of the academic profession competencies necessary at the beginning of the senior academic career. From the point of view of the Croatian academic context it is important to distinguish between junior and senior academic career. According to Croatian national legislation for higher education, senior academics include tenured professors, full professors, associate professors and assistant professors.

Research results presented in this paper are a part of the research on academic profession competencies. The research method applied in this study was an online survey, and the research instrument used was a survey questionnaire.

The survey questionnaire was used on a sample of senior and junior academics working in public Universities in the Republic of Croatia. The study included a representative sample of senior and junior academics from all seven public universities, taking into account their representativeness with regard to the population. The database created for the purpose of this study contains information about 8634 senior and junior academics with contract-based employment in all seven Croatian universities. The invitation to participate in the study was distributed to more than 70% of the presumed population, given that it is a large population which cannot be reliably determined by an exact number, that previous research (Ćulum & Ledić, 2010, 2011) showed that the response of respondents is relatively small (about 15%), and that it was crucial to ensure the representation of homogeneous research groups according to selected independent variables. This number deviates from the official data of the Central Bureau of Statistics, while the Ministry of Science and Education has a database of employees at the Croatian universities, however, it does not contain the updated information on the scientific and teaching ranks of the employees, nor their email addresses. Neither Universities nor particular university constituents have employee databases with their e-mail addresses, therefore, this research entailed combining and unifying the data made available by the relevant ministry and particular universities, as well as the data found on the webpages of universities, faculties/academies or university units. In order to respect the research ethics (Milas, 2005) and preserve the anonymity and secrecy of the participants' data, the database has not been and will not be publicly available. In accordance with the experiences from previous research, the expected survey response rate was relatively low, while it was important to ensure the presence of homogeneous

research groups according to the selected independent variables. It should be noted that the conducted national research examining the attitudes of the academic profession by means of online surveys have shown a relatively low response rate (about 15%). There were 1,130 valid survey questionnaires in this study, which represents between 10 and 13% of the total population.

The survey questionnaire contained a preamble and three content units. The first unit contained demographic information defined on the basis of the independent research variables - titles, fields, universities, gender and age. The second unit was the scale for the mastery assessment of particular competencies necessary at the beginning of their senior academic career. The third unit is an evaluation scale of their level of mastery of the given competencies up to their current academic career stage. For the purposes of this paper, the results obtained based on the analysis of answers from the second unit of the survey questionnaire shall be used. The 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 research participants (682 senior academics and 448 junior academics) from seven Croatian public universities participated in the research. The data was analysed using the Statistical Package IBM SPSS Statistics 20.0. This paper will present the results of descriptive statistics - the mean and standard deviation, as well as the percentage of a particular answer on a Likert-type scale.

According to the previously mentioned research (Turk & Ledić, 2016), the competencies were arranged into five groups – **teaching competencies** (Developing syllabus; 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 the learning outcomes; Applying active learning techniques in the teaching process; Creating an environment that will encourage students to learn; Applying various procedures of assessment and evaluation of students' success aligned with the learning outcomes; Applying research findings in teaching; Using e-learning and its integration into teaching; Adjustment of the teaching process to the students with special needs; Monitoring and advising younger colleagues in relation to teaching; Introducing changes in the syllabus.), **research competencies** (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 academic writing and publishing; Monitoring and advising younger colleagues in relation to research activity; Implementing review procedures in one's own research field; Familiarity with program/project management (writing, applying and managing programs/projects); Familiarity with the financing opportunities for projects in the field of one's own research interest; Creating and maintaining (international) research networks), **third mission competencies** (Educating students as socially responsible and active citizens; Implementation of projects which are significant in terms of the 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), **leadership competencies in higher education** (Familiarity with strategic planning principles; Familiarity with negotiation and conflict resolution principles; Managing financial resources of the institution/department/chair; Defining ethical values of the institution/department/chair; Introducing innovations and changes in the work of the institution/department/chair) and **general (academic) competencies**. 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 that correspond to the 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; Continuing professional development and personal growth planning in key academic activities; Cooperation with the public sector and economy (institutions and companies from the related field); Familiarity and the application of the fundamental legal documents (acts, regulations...) in the area of science and higher education; Identifying and monitoring recent changes in the educational and research policies; Having basic knowledge about intellectual property; Familiarity with ethical principles in teaching and research).

Research results and discussion

Table 1 shows the academic profession competencies based on the self-assessments regarding the mastery of the competencies necessary at the beginning of the senior academic career. Given the arithmetic mean of each individual item, it is evident that the research participants assess that they have mastered certain competencies. Arithmetic means range from the lowest (M = 3.19) to the highest (M = 4.74), where 42 competencies were evaluated as being of great importance (ranging from M = 3.50 to M = 4.74). That is not surprising since they were offered competencies that, according to the literature in this field, should be relevant to the academic profession.

Table 1: The self-assessment of academic profession competencies mastery

Competency	**1+2**	**3**	**4+5**	**M**	**SD**
General IT literacy (Windows, Microsoft Office, Internet, e-mail)	0.5	3.6	95.9	4.74	0.552
Oral and written communication in the mother tongue	0.8	3.2	96	4,73	0.569
Oral and written communication in at least one world language	0.5	3.4	96.2	4,69	0.563
Familiarity with the basic principles of academic writing and publishing	1	4.6	94.4	4,63	0.632
Continuing professional development and personal growth planning in key academic activities	0.7	4.7	94.6	4,62	0.614
Using efficient strategies of searching through research and profession-related literature	0.7	6.4	92.9	4,54	0.655
Presentation skills	0.5	5.8	93.7	4,53	0.631
Creating an environment that will encourage students to learn	1.5	5.8	92.7	4,52	0.695
Planning and carrying out teaching	1.6	7	91.5	4,49	0.712
Setting clear objectives and results in the process of teaching and learning	1.3	8.1	90.5	4,46	0.72
Familiarity with ethical principles in teaching and research	2.2	7.8	90	4.46	0.758
Educating students as socially responsible and active citizens	3.3	9.3	87.3	4.41	0.814
Using efficient strategies of critical assessment and analysis of scientific literature	1.8	8.5	89.7	4.39	0.725
Applying research findings in teaching	2.7	12.1	85.2	4.28	0.813
Knowledge in the field of research methodology and statistical data processing	3.5	12.4	84.1	4.24	0.825

Understanding and the application of theories that learning and teaching processes are based on	3.0	15.1	81.9	4.19	0.833
Applying various methods of teaching harmonized with the learning outcomes	2.5	15	82.5	4.19	0.805
Working in an interdisciplinary environment	2.4	15.5	82.1	4.19	0.808
Applying active learning techniques in the teaching process	3.4	13.4	83.2	4.18	0.817
Creating and maintaining (international) research networks	5.9	13.6	80.5	4.17	0.935
Applying various procedures of assessment and evaluation of students' success harmonized with the learning outcomes	3.7	15.9	80.4	4.14	0.844
Defining ethical values of the institution/department/chair	7.0	17.7	75.3	4.07	0.979
Introducing changes in the syllabus	5.5	15.8	78.6	4.07	0.897
Introducing innovations and changes in the work of the institution/department/chair	4.9	18.9	76.2	4.05	0.897
Implementing review procedures in one's own research field	5.7	20.7	73.6	4.02	0.93
Familiarity with the financing opportunities for projects in the field of one's own research interest	7.6	17.7	74.7	4.02	0.986
Developing syllabus	8.7	17.7	73.7	3.98	1.002
Leading teams and individuals	5.9	22.4	71.7	3.95	0.9
Monitoring and advising younger colleagues in relation to the research activity	9.4	17.7	72.9	3.95	1.009
Monitoring and advising younger colleagues in relation to the teaching activity	9.2	17.8	73	3.94	1.009
Using e-learning and its integration in teaching	7.8	21.9	70.4	3.90	0.996
Familiarity with the program/project management (writing, applying and managing programs/projects)	9.2	21.2	69.7	3.88	0.998
Adjustment of the teaching process to students with special needs	8.8	21.8	69.4	3.87	0.977
Implementation of projects which are significant in terms of the community's needs	8.3	24.9	66.9	3.86	0.969
Familiarity with negotiation and conflict resolution principles	6.1	25.5	68.4	3.85	0.872
Identifying and monitoring recent changes in educational and research policies	9.5	23.4	67.1	3.79	0.933
Cooperation with the public sector and economy (institutions and companies from the related field)	13.3	27	59.7	3.66	1.053
Participating in public discussions of general	11.1	30.2	58.8	3.63	0.984

social importance from the professional perspective					
Familiarity and the application of fundamental legal documents (acts, regulations...) in the area of research and higher education	12.8	29.8	57.3	3.59	0.975
Familiarity with strategic planning principles	14.3	28.6	57	3.56	1.013
Having basic knowledge about intellectual property	14.1	32.9	53.1	3.51	0.983
Encouraging students to participate in volunteer programs and programs that contribute to the development of the community	16.3	30.6	53.1	3.50	1.07
Cooperation with the civil sector	18.4	36.2	45.4	3.34	1.017
Managing financial resources of the institution/ department/ chair	22.9	33.7	43.4	3.28	1.096
Participation in the volunteer and philanthropic programs and activities in the community	23.9	37.1	39	3.19	1.073

The research results show that the academics estimated the following competencies as the ones they have mastered the most: *General IT literacy (Windows, Microsoft Office, Internet, e-mail)* (M=4.74, SD=0.552), *Oral and written communication in the mother tongue* (M=4.73, SD=0.569), *Oral and written communication in at least one world language* (M=4.69, SD=0.563), *Familiarity with the basic principles of scientific writing and publishing* (M=4.63, SD=0.632), *Continuing professional development and personal growth planning in key academic activities* (M=4.62, SD=0.614). The figures clearly reveal that four of the main five competencies in terms of the mastery level are from the group of general academic competencies.

By comparing these results with the results of the research on the importance of academic profession competencies (Turk & Ledić, 2016), a similar order can be observed within the assessments of the main five competencies in both importance and mastery groups. Academic competencies represented in both groups are *Oral and written communication in at least one world language*, *General IT literacy (Windows, Microsoft Office, Internet, e-mail)* and the scientific and research competency *Familiarity with the basic principles of scientific writing and publishing*. Although the assessments of mastery for the top five ranked competencies are higher than the assessments of importance, it can be assumed that a certain logical equivalence occurred in the top ranked competencies in the assessments of importance and of mastery, as indicated by the high concordance in the results of the arithmetic means and standard

deviations of these competencies. An example of the logical equivalence is a statement p→q (if p then q), which in the context of importance and mastery of competencies can be expressed using the language of logic as - if I think a particular competency is extremely important, then I have highly mastered it. In other words, the academics deem these competencies to be very important and have, therefore, mastered them. It should be noted that in these and similar research projects, results, as well as the generalized conclusions, should be interpreted with caution, since they are a product of self-assessments which are under the influence of the current personal and social environment (Milas, 2005). Furthermore, the importance of so-called soft skills or transferable competencies in recent discussions and policy recommendations is fully highlighted. In that context such a result would not be unexpected because it might be interpreted as a directly related indicator of research participants social environment.

It is particularly interesting to note that none of the competencies that frame the academic teaching found their place among the first five ranks of academics' mastery self-assessments. The result itself may be indicative in the context of discussions about the interconnectedness and interdependence of the academics' teaching and research activities and their appraisal within the relevant framework of Croatian (higher) education policy. However, these findings are somewhat opposite to the ones of a recent qualitative study (Turk & Ledić, 2014) which indicates that the Croatian academics predominantly perceive themselves as teachers. It could be argued, however, that the result of such self-perception was not induced by intrinsic motivation and the academics' preferences for teaching, but by (current) changes in the national higher education area and the (continuously) increasing teaching loads. The presented results indicate that the academics in Croatia primarily perceive their academic role in a wider academic context, then as researchers and finally as teachers.

Contrary to the above mentioned results, the research participants assessed that the following competencies are the ones they have mastered the least: *Having basic knowledge about intellectual property* (M=3.51, SD=0.983), *Encouraging students to participate in volunteer programs and programs that contribute to the development of the community* (M=3.50, SD=1.07), *Cooperation with the civil sector* (M=3.34, SD=1.017), *Managing financial resources of the institution/department/chair* (M=3.28, SD=1.096), *Participation in volunteer and philanthropic programs and activities in the community* (M=3.19, SD=1.073).

As in the assessment of importance, the lowest ranked competencies regarding the level of mastery are the third mission competencies (*Encouraging students to participate in volunteer programs and programs that contribute to the development of the community*, *Cooperation with the civil sector* and *Participation in volunteer and philanthropic programs and activities in the community*), followed by leadership competencies (*Managing financial resources of the institution/department/chair*) and general academic competencies (*Having basic knowledge about intellectual property*). The result which indicates a low level of mastery of the third mission competencies is not surprising since it was evident from the research on the importance of academic profession competencies (Turk & Ledić, 2016) that the third mission competencies were among the lowest ranked ones. Therefore, based on the presented research results, it can be concluded that the academics neither consider the third mission competencies to be important nor estimate that they have sufficiently mastered them. It is therefore possible to infer that the concept of the third mission of universities reveals itself as a challenge in the academic community in Croatia, both in terms of its thematic and conceptual aspect and in terms of application in practice. Accordingly, the researchers in this field and the educational policy creators are confronted with numerous challenges related to its implementation in the (main) academic activities. Furthermore, it is possible to discuss this particular result following the theoretical discussion on academic service-learning as a teaching methodology model (Mikelić Preradović & Boras, 2006). Even though the concept of academic service-learning is not a new (teaching) model in a national academic area (first papers and discussions are dated in the early 2000s), it is evident that the perceptions and the level of information of Croatian academics are still relatively low. Following such a result, it could be potentially suggested that future research in the national context should be focused on this aspect which requires deeper research investigation and discussion with proper theoretical and content background.

A particularly interesting finding is connected with the competency *Adjustment of the teaching process to students with special needs*. Students with special needs require multiple adjustments altogether, the study process, and the study conditions because they unavoidably face barriers that prevent or diminish their full and dynamic inclusion and participation in the study process. This competency assumed the lowest position in the rankings of competencies by their importance and is positioned in the second half on the scale, indicating mastery level. It was considered the 36th place in

the assessment of the academics' mastery of each competency. This result is significant to take seriously and discuss it on the national level. Suppose the Recommendations on the inclusion of higher education students and staff with physical, mental or health-related conditions in the Erasmus+ programme (2016) are considered. In that case, national policy stakeholders should be concerned with such a result mainly if the result is analysed in the context of advocacy recommendation which stated that academics should advocate for the specific inclusion of measures to promote international learning mobility for students and staff with physical, mental or health-related conditions. This result can be partly worrying as it may indicate an insufficient level of awareness of academic staff about students with special needs.

Conclusion

The research results indicate that the academics from Croatia assessed that the following competencies are the ones they have mastered the most: *General IT literacy (Windows, Microsoft Office, Internet, e-mail), Oral and written communication in the mother tongue, Oral and written communication in at least one world language, Familiarity with the basic principles of scientific writing and publishing, Continuing professional development and personal growth planning in key academic activities.* Research participants assessed that the competencies they have mastered the least are the ones connected with the basic knowledge in the field of intellectual property, skills required to encourage students to participate in volunteer programs and programs that contribute to the development of the community, cooperation with the civil sector, knowledge, skills and abilities of managing financial resources of the institution/department/chair and the skills required for participation in volunteer and philanthropic programs and activities in the community. It is, therefore, clear that as in the assessment of importance, the top-ranking competencies in the assessment of the academics' level of mastery are those oriented towards the general academic activities and research activities, while teaching and the third mission remain in the background of the mentioned academic activities.

In this context, apart from the concept of the universities' third mission, teaching, that is, the development of teaching competencies, reveals itself as a challenge for the national academic community, in terms of its thematic and conceptual aspect, as well as in terms of its application and development in practice.

In addition to the specific topics referring to particular competencies, this research study also provoked discussions about 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 wider frameworks of educational policies, it could be important to examine the preparedness and support of their (current) creators, especially in the context of the mentioned groups of competencies (teaching and third mission competencies) as well as regarding the competency approach, as an important element in planning the development of activities and the advancements within the academic profession.

Furthermore, this research results might be the starting point for policymakers in the national higher education area:

1. They should be focused on teaching competencies and their enhancement in a higher education institution.
2. Third mission competencies which might be related to the service-learning model should be strongly advocated and developed in national educational policies.
3. The national policy framework should consider results in teaching students with special needs, which is obviously a profoundly challenging issue in the understanding of academics in Croatia.

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