



UNIVERSITY

Development Strategy 2025-2030

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1. Introduction

After 31 years of activity in the field of education, of which 24 years in the higher education system as the first private higher education institution, the University has achieved exceptional results in the creation, development, and implementation of new study programs, as well as in other areas related to higher education. It introduced numerous innovations in the then still largely outdated Croatian higher education, the most important of which are:

- the first private initiative and investment in higher education,
- entrepreneurship as an unavoidable topic of study programs,
- interactive problem-oriented teaching focused on the needs of the individual student as the dominant form of study,
- strong representation of ICT content in all studies,
- business communication skills in Croatian and foreign languages in all studies,
- the first application of the Bologna principles of study.

A recognizable educational and management model, successful generations of its graduates and active students, its own teachers and external associates, clear strategic guidelines, have contributed to the development of the University into a dynamic and enterprising higher education institution.

Successful and dynamic growth in the past period has created resources that enable the continuation of academic and program development. In the strategic document *VERN' 2020 – Strategic Development Framework 2010-2020*, VERN' University of Applied Sciences has determined the key parameters of its development. One of the most important among them is growing into a university. Since there is no possibility of direct transformation of a polytechnic into a university in the Croatian legal system, but it is necessary to establish a new institution, this process began in 2016 with the decision to establish VERN University and the corresponding registration with the Commercial Court in Zagreb, and ended with obtaining a license in 2020.

In the field of higher education, there is a growing need for the development of new educational content and forms that, along with all other goals, will contribute to the application of the lifelong learning paradigm. The continuous adaptation of the existing content is also a paramount. Therefore, our strategic orientation is the establishment and development of an innovative and entrepreneurial university that will cover various scientific, professional and artistic fields, develop capacities for basic and applied research, which is integrated into the social context primarily by its academic excellence, business success and social responsibility.

From its inception to the present day, European universities have had a major impact on the social, economic and cultural development of Europe. They have always represented centers in which new knowledge was created. Innovations necessary for the development of the society in which they operated were also developed. Modern education shapes many aspects of our present and future lives in different ways. Throughout history, it has adapted to the changes that occurred as a result of the development of technology, social and the overall development of civilization.

The changes in the education system were slow. Once created, educational models were retained for a longer period of time before changes were undertaken, which was a consequence of a slower social transformation, but also a rather conservative educational culture that did not sufficiently support transformations in education. Modern technology, globalization, and social networking have in many ways changed and significantly dynamized the conditions in which educational systems and models are organized. Pressure on education systems is increasing and frequent, but changes are still slow to implement, in part due to a persistent culture of resistance.

The global economy and global labor market requirements are constantly changing. Only twenty years ago, the economies of some countries did not participate in global economic exchange, nor did they have an impact on economic flows. There is a transformation of economic capabilities, and the birth of new markets and companies that operate globally. New needs are created in the markets, as well as new demands on education systems. Formerly closed national systems, tend to internationalize and attract students from all over the world today. More dynamic economies attract young graduates from countries that cannot offer them a suitable job, thus weakening the capabilities of those economies that have invested in the education of these professionals.

In the developed world, those who complete higher education studies have a better chance of getting a job. In its 2020 strategic document, *The European Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth*, the European Union clearly indicated these trends, and established that there can be no development without developed higher education and lifelong learning systems.

Today's and tomorrow's jobs require an increasing variety of skills that cannot be acquired through formal education alone. Changes in formal higher education programs and the establishment of a lifelong learning model, should contribute to bringing the education sector and the economy closer together, with the aim of developing programs that are adjusted to economic and market dynamics. This goal is one of the most important and most demanding goals for the management structures of higher education, both for those that are part of the state-funded institutions and for those that manage private, state-licensed, higher education institutions.

The dynamics of economic and general social development on a global scale is largely based on continuous innovation and entrepreneurial activities, which direct development of higher education systems towards innovative and entrepreneurial models of structuring and management, as well as business and academic activities. In this sense, in its development so far, the University has proven to be a higher education institution that belongs to the highest rank of innovation and entrepreneurship in the Croatian higher education system.

Starting from these assumptions, the Development Strategy 2025-2030 amends the basic determinations on which the development of the University will be based - mission, vision and starting values. The strategy defines the goals, program frameworks, and key areas of academic development – study programs, research and development, lifelong learning, European and international cooperation. The development framework established in this manner also introduces a new approach to administrative, academic, and business leadership and organization, as well as to the organizational environment. It also enables a clearer understanding and planning of the assumptions underpinning this development.

2. Purpose and Determinants of the Establishment and Operation of the University

2.1. Global and local context.

Globalization affects all aspects of modern life, including education. Most of the existing educational models were created in the 19th century to massively educate workers for well-known industrial jobs. Today's education needs to be able to respond to the challenges of the 21st century and train people to live in a globalized world that is changing faster than ever before. Many studies conducted within universities have found practical application in everyday life. The continuation of such research will be a decisive factor distinguishing those countries that invest in science and research—thereby creating the foundations for economic and overall community development—from those that will lag behind due to neglecting science and education. Contemporary development requires a different approach to higher education and scientific research than the one that dominates in Croatia today.

Over the past twenty years, the European Union has implemented numerous and very demanding changes in higher education systems in order to adapt them to social and economic needs. The most famous change refers to the implementation of the Bologna model, which should achieve key goals in bringing education closer to the needs of European and national economies, and the establishment of qualification frameworks that require the development of occupational standards and qualifications, and the connection of education and the labor market.

Changes in the field of higher education should have influenced the strategic orientation of higher education institutions in the EU towards new forms of action and towards assumption of responsibility, as opposed to the earlier period in which they mainly implemented what the ministries in charge of higher education created and demanded of them. The new model has opened up space for cooperation with non-academic institutions (civil sector), as well as with the business environment, which has begun to emerge as a key partner in identifying market needs. This should have enabled changes in educational programs. Following the change in the model, numerous legal adjustments have taken place in the EU, opening up a new space for universities and other higher education institutions. New forms of autonomy were to develop increased accountability of higher education institutions towards society, financing, human resource management, students, and the labor market. European strategic documents that have shaped new education systems and models are aimed at connecting research, education, and the market.

With the development of new trends in higher education, the concept of *an entrepreneurial university has emerged*, which implies a university that uses various mechanisms for the direct application of research results for the benefit of the community at the local and national level. Such a university connects with the business sector with which it exchanges research knowledge, business experience, and jointly determines the needs of the market for highly educated personnel. Of course, this does not mean that the traditional role of the university (educational and scientific) has been neglected, as it continues to represent *the conditio sine qua non* of the university's mission.

The need for changes in European universities and their adaptation to the environment and trends encourages universities to develop from the unquestionable and only *producer of*

knowledge, towards new forms of activity in which the focus is directed to the creation of technological innovations, basic and applied scientific research, and networking with business and other actors within national borders, but also beyond. The goal is to direct the knowledge created in research towards the transfer of knowledge to students (*traditional educational function*), but at the same time to turn that same knowledge into innovation, and through intensive cooperation with the business sector, appropriate state institutions, and local self-government institutions, to strengthen regional and national economic capacities (*non-traditional entrepreneurial function*).

Universities have traditionally developed two paradigms: research and education. Today, another one is emerging: contributing to economic development at the local and national level (in the context of the EU also at the European level). Consequently, new and innovative activities are expected from the university with the aim of developing the institution and its capacities. The aforementioned activities and the concept of an entrepreneurial university have been specially developed in the USA, but they have also appeared in Europe for the past twenty years.

Education and research should provide students with a new way of critical thinking that develops innovation and creativity, effective problem-solving and independent decision-making. They need to be trained in new means of work that require new communication and collaboration skills, the ability to recognize and use the possibilities of new technologies, as well as to create and develop new values in a multidimensional world. As a new university, based on the long-term entrepreneurial and innovative experience and practice of its founder in higher education, the University is aware of all the changes and requirements that modern society places on higher education. Therefore, it will base its development from the beginning on the following determinants:

- development of new and interdisciplinary programs in cooperation with the business and social community,
- creating preconditions for the development of basic and applied research, national and international research networking, and creating conditions for the development of new generations of researchers, innovators, and highly educated entrepreneurs,
- application of research knowledge in education and practice through cooperation with the business sector,
- networking with industry, private and public research institutions, state and private funders, and other universities to create new knowledge and skills,
- internationalization of universities, which implies the creation and implementation of joint studies intended for the international student population,
- upgrading traditional educational models with modern methodological and didactic achievements, with an emphasis on special programs for the best students and
- increasing independent sources of funding from national and international projects and using EU funds for the development of educational and research capacities.

2.2. Key achievements 2000-2025

The University is a new educational and scientific project of the VERN' Group d.o.o. that makes a logical step forward in the development of the VERN' educational brand.

Educational and organizational achievements in the last almost three decades in the field of education, of which two and a half in the field of higher education, are the basis for the

beginning of the development of university study programs and research potentials.

- VERN' was founded in 1990 as an agency for counseling and mediation in education abroad (application office for foreign schools in Croatia).
- In 1994, VERN' began to carry out its own one-year professional business educational programs with the appropriate license for the then 5th level of education.
- The year 2000 marked the entry into the field of higher education with the establishment of the College of Economics of Entrepreneurship with the right of publicity (the legal predecessor of today's VERN' University of Applied Sciences), based on the license of the then Ministry of Science and Technology of the Republic of Croatia to carry out a two-year professional study of Economics of Entrepreneurship (the first and for a long time the only study on the topic of entrepreneurship in Croatia), at the then 6th level of education.
- In 2001, the curriculum of this study was aligned with the principles of the Bologna Declaration and underwent an international evaluation conducted by the expert team of the Finnish University of Vaasa. It was the first program in the Republic of Croatia structured according to the Bologna principles; the others were harmonized only in 2005.
- Already in 2002, in cooperation with the University of Vaasa from Finland, the Italian Institute ISTUD, the University of Zadar and the Center for Entrepreneurship of Zadar County, as the coordinator of the *Champions of Entrepreneurship* project, VERN' joined the *Tempus program* of the European Union with the main goal of further development of the curriculum of entrepreneurial higher education in the region, in accordance with the principles of the Bologna process.
- The year 2005 marks a significant step forward for VERN' towards a new level of organization and development of educational programs. A new professional study of Business Informatics was introduced, and three specialist graduate professional studies were launched: Entrepreneurial Management, Business Communications Management, and Accounting and Finance.
- In 2007 the College of Economics of Entrepreneurship is growing into the VERN' University of Applied Sciences, the first Croatian private polytechnic, oriented towards business education, with a strong emphasis on the development of an entrepreneurial worldview.
- Further development of VERN' University of Applied Sciences was directed towards the joining of existing higher education institutions. In 2009, the Zagreb School of Management, specializing in the education of management personnel in tourism, joined VERN's higher education group, followed by the College of Journalism in 2011. In 2013, in accordance with the strategic goals, VERN' University of Applied Sciences was joined by two new institutions, the Polytechnic College with a professional undergraduate study of Technical Management and the Kairos College of Public Relations and Media Studies with the professional undergraduate study of Public Relations and Media.
- In 2012, VERN' University of Applied Sciences is making a new significant step forward. As part of the *Island Initiative project*, an initiative of VERN' to help revitalize Croatian islands, it is refurbishing the oldest school in Vis into a modern dislocated campus on the island of Vis, where the International University Center VERN' – Vis is being built, which was used to host some elective and field classes, for international

conferences, workshops and projects, as well as for cooperation with partner institutions.

- In 2014, the development of the quality assurance and assurance system in higher education resulted in the awarding of the international ESG certificate (*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*) to VERN' University of Applied Sciences for an efficient, developed and functionally structured quality assurance system in education, based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. With this certificate, which is awarded for a period of five years, the Agency for Science and Higher Education has confirmed that the quality assurance system at VERN' University of Applied Sciences is in line with the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area.
- In 2016, the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports of the Republic of Croatia issues a license to VERN' University of Applied Sciences to conduct the undergraduate study of Film, Television and Multimedia Design and the graduate specialist study of Human Resources Management.
- In 2016, the process of the initial accreditation process for VERN' University was formally started. After the first phase of initial accreditation, the Ministry of Science and Education issued approval for the establishment of a higher education institution.
- In 2018, the initial accreditation of the graduate specialist study of Film and Television Directing and Production was carried out. In the same year, VERN' undergoes a certification audit according to the ISO 9001:2015 standard.
- In 2020, the first three-year initial university accreditation in the Republic of Croatia was successfully completed according to the highest international standards, and on June 26, 2020, the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Croatia issued licenses to VERN' University to carry out three university undergraduate studies. In the academic year 2020/2021, the study of Cyber Communications and Network Science and Transmedia Dramaturgy began. The Internet of Things began to be implemented a year later.
- In 2021, the process of integration of the University of Applied Sciences with VERN' University was completed. The University moved into the premises of the new VERN' Cube academic campus, at Palmotićeve ulica 82/1, in January 2021.

In conclusion, VERN' University of Applied Sciences, on whose experience and good practice the establishment of VERN' University is based, carried out 14 study programs in the professional vertical of the education system, at two educational levels: undergraduate and graduate. The acquired educational and research experience was a significant support for the development of educational and scientific research capacities of the University, which develops undergraduate and graduate university and professional studies in the social, technical, and artistic fields. The University develops research projects, with the aim of developing new knowledge that will be transferred to students in the teaching process, based on existing scientific capacities. Also, with this strategy and the development of scientific research potentials, space is created for the inclusion of students in certain phases of the research process that will be related to their teaching requirements in certain subjects.

3. Vision, Mission, Values, and Goals

3.1. Vision

Educated, enterprising, and socially responsible people are the bearers of sustainable development and community well-being

3.2. Mission

Through academic excellence and socially responsible entrepreneurial activities, the University develops scientific, professional, and entrepreneurial competencies in the fields of economy, technology, and creative industries, and encourages career development through interaction, fulfillment, and satisfaction through innovative and multidisciplinary study programs.

3.3. Features

In accordance with the above vision and mission, we are focused on the development of the following qualities:

- **expertise:** acquired knowledge and competences specific to the chosen field/profession,
- **scientific competences:** acquired knowledge and skills for the application of scientific methods, critical thinking, and the development of new knowledge and innovations that contribute to the development of the profession and society
- **critical thinking:** researching and creative problem solving, making thoughtful and informed decisions, taking responsibility for one's own learning,
- **entrepreneurial competencies:** developed entrepreneurial skills (creativity, innovation, communicativeness, recognition of opportunities, and risk-taking),
- **Business:** acquired knowledge and skills for business planning, negotiation, presentation, ICT, business literacy, foreign languages (business discourse), and business ethics.
- **interaction:** acquisition of knowledge and skills in predominantly small study groups based on problem-oriented case analyses, and directed towards the needs and development of the individual student; encouraging students to continuous personal engagement and active participation in the teaching process,
- **fulfillment:** by organizing free (extracurricular) activities, encouraging students to live a fulfilling life rich in cultural, sports, and social content, and
- **satisfaction:** acquiring knowledge through a demanding, but at the same time interesting and exciting process that imbues students and teachers alike with creative enthusiasm and satisfaction.

3.4. Values

The personal and social values that we particularly emphasize in our daily work and actions in accordance with the declared vision and mission are the following:

- we respect others and those who are different as a pledge of our own freedom and

humane social relations,

- recognize personal strengths, arouse, support, and develop the aspiration for excellence and achievements of individuals as the basic building block of the well-being of the community, and
- encourage openness, boldness, diligence, responsibility, and ethics as qualities that lead to individual success and the prosperity of society.

3.5. Goals

Our general and specific, educational, business and institutional goals are inspired and aligned with the declared vision, mission, and values. The University is strategically focused on education for the values and competencies that our students and teachers need in achieving their personal life aspirations and career potentials, as well as the well-being of our community.

Our educational goals are to train students to:

- active contribution to the creation of new values and dynamic development of a professional career from the first day of employment in the chosen field and profession,
- ambitious continuation of academic education and further development of educational and scientific competences, and
- successful launch and realization of one's own entrepreneurial venture immediately after successful completion of studies.

As a subject of socially responsible entrepreneurship in the education market, we determine and achieve our business goals:

- continuous contribution to academic excellence in the process of achieving educational goals,
- continuous contribution to academic excellence in the process of achievement in science and professional production, and
- continuous business success in sustainable and socially responsible entrepreneurial activity.

Our institutional goal is to provide quality, efficient, fair, and international higher education and science that contribute to the competitiveness of Croatian society.

3.6. Principles of action

VERN¹ University applies the following principles in its activities:

- the principle of academic integrity and autonomy,
- the principle of social responsibility and public action for the benefit of the individual and society,
- the principle of business self-sustainability and responsible and successful business,
- the principle of academic and research excellence and international comparability,
- the principle of transparency,
- the principle of quality assurance, and
- the principle of taking responsibility for personal and institutional development.

4. Innovative and Entrepreneurial University

The innovative and entrepreneurial VERN' University is created on the foundations and experience gained through almost thirty years of continuous educational activity of its founder – the VERN' Group d.o.o. In the evaluation document of the Finnish University of Vaasa from 2002, which evaluated the activities of the then College of Economics of Entrepreneurship, whose successor is the existing VERN' University of Applied Sciences, and indirectly the University, it was pointed out that the University even then sufficiently met the four basic Determinants of an entrepreneurial higher education institution:

1. *Entrepreneurship by knowing* – at the University, entrepreneurship is developed through the transfer of business knowledge and skills, including business economics contained in subjects such as accounting and finance, marketing, business leadership, planning, and management,
2. *Entrepreneurship by understanding* – an extremely large number of teachers are engaged at the University with an understanding of entrepreneurial challenges through their own entrepreneurial experiences that they pass on to students and build an entrepreneurial worldview and behavior in them,
3. *Entrepreneurship by doing* - at the University, teaching is based on the interaction between students and teachers in a problem-oriented teaching process aimed at solving business-entrepreneurial cases, including the practical work of students, to the extent that this business environment supports, and
4. *Entrepreneurship by being* – in this sense, the University as an entrepreneurial higher education institution is in an extremely favorable position, since it is in itself an entrepreneurial venture in the sphere of higher education without precedent in the environment in which it operates.

4.1. Conceptual and programmatic framework

The basic orientation of the University is the construction of an integrated university program framework that simultaneously enables *vertical* university education for the profession in the chosen field, as well as *horizontal*, individual, and flexible, modular complementation of competencies with elective study content from other fields.

The basis of program development is represented by study programs at the undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate levels, as well as the development of research capacities and research activities of the university. Special attention is paid to the development of lifelong learning educational programs.

The basic program units are study programs where students are educated and acquire professional competencies. Study programs are aligned with one another in the teaching of core content, which forms the foundation of the University's unified academic structure. In this way, every student—regardless of the program they choose—receives a foundational education in sustainable development and social responsibility, European orientation, entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity, technological competencies, and business and communication skills.

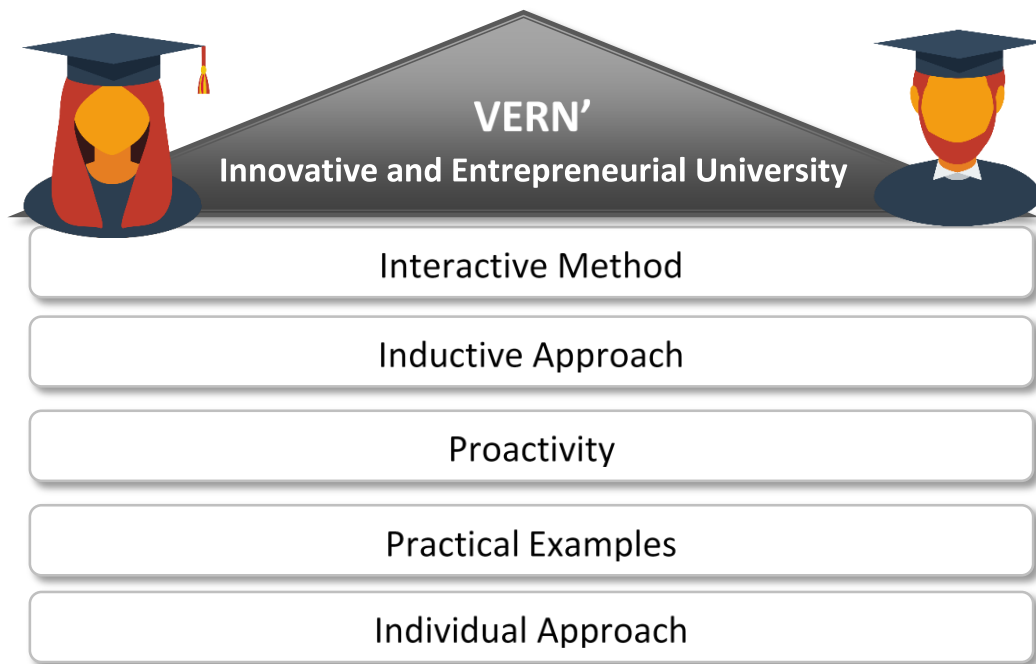


Figure 1. Characteristics of the teaching methodology

The characteristics of the teaching methodology at the University are as follows:

- individual attitude towards each student, which implies that teachers know the basic character and psycho-social characteristics of the student,
- learning from real examples, which includes the analysis and preparation of case studies from domestic and international business practice,
- encouraging student proactivity in all segments of teaching, which implies identifying and preventing possible problems in real projects for the economy, incubating new ideas and initiatives from teaching, and participating in extracurricular social activities,
- an interactive method of learning and teaching that implies an approach to teaching as a process of creation, not just the transfer of knowledge,
- learning is a collaborative process, not just an individual one,
- understanding as a process of cognitive interaction between teachers and students: development of critical thinking and research competencies of students through participation in research and development projects.

The interaction of three elements of the conceptual and program framework (educational pillars – *verticals*, educational foundations – *horizontal*s, and educational methodology – “*in VERN's way*”) ensures a unique and recognizable three-dimensional educational matrix of an innovative and entrepreneurial university in the European educational area and in the higher education market. In addition to the classic educational matrices, the realization of the aforementioned will also be ensured by the development of e-learning platforms. The ultimate goal in this area is to build a full-fledged functional university matrix of studies and educational programs.

The key areas through which the University's development strategy is implemented are:

- the development of interdisciplinary studies,
- encouraging basic and applied scientific research,
- internationalization of universities by entering foreign markets and developing joint study programs,
- development of lifelong learning programs,
- development of international cooperation,
- academic mobility of students, teaching and non-teaching staff,
- the development of human resources,
- continuous development of the quality assurance system,
- cooperation with the social community,
- transformation of professional studies into university studies,
- attracting more foreign students,
- development of extracurricular content,
- development of scientific and professional project activities.

4.2. Development of new and interdisciplinary studies

Contemporary development trends in science and higher education are increasingly steering universities toward the creation of new and interdisciplinary study programs designed in collaboration with the business sector and in response to social needs. Through this approach, students are enabled not only to develop the scientific and research components of their competitiveness but also to acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies — as well as generic skills — that will significantly enhance their employability and competitiveness in the labor market.

Our educational objectives are to teach students how to create new value and pursue dynamic professional career development, as well as to prepare them for further academic postgraduate education and the advancement of their professional and scientific competencies.

The University will develop study programs at the undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate levels, either independently or in cooperation with other universities in the Republic of Croatia and abroad. In addition to university study programs, professional study programs focused on acquiring practical knowledge and skills will also be developed, enabling students to obtain comprehensive qualifications at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

The University's long-term strategic orientation is to develop study programs with a relatively small number of excellent students who will study interactively and primarily in small groups.

The University is strategically focused on research and education that foster the values and competencies needed by our students and teachers to achieve their personal life aspirations, career potential, and contribute to the well-being of the broader community.

Strategic goals in the field of development and implementation of studies are:

- development of new and interdisciplinary studies in cooperation with the business sector and in accordance with societal needs,
- socially responsible planning of enrolment in studies and studies in accordance with

- social needs,
- use of modern teaching interactive methods, and
- transfer of acquired scientific knowledge into the teaching process.

4.3. Encouraging basic and applied scientific research

Education and research are becoming one of the most important foundations of economic and social development. New interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches to scientific research, combined with the application of appropriate methodological and didactic models, should enable a highly effective transfer of knowledge and insights.

The University will focus on developing such education and research, based on the use of existing and the development of new scientific capacities. Furthermore, through this strategy and the enhancement of scientific and research potential, opportunities will be created for students to participate in specific stages of the research process, which will be linked to their academic obligations in particular courses.

In planning research activities, attention will be given to maintaining a balance between fundamental and applied research, while creating the conditions for cooperation with the business sector and the broader community.

The strategic objectives of the University in the field of scientific research and artistic projects are defined by European, national, and institutional strategic documents in the area of higher education and science. The following are particularly emphasized:

- strengthening scientific research potentials through scientific, professional, and artistic projects,
- ensuring the financing of scientific and artistic projects from our own funds, and through cooperation with other institutions that finance research, and in particular through cooperation with economic entities on applied research,
- encouraging research mobility and international cooperation,
- encouraging an entrepreneurial and innovative approach in scientific, research, and artistic work,
- development of a system for the transfer of scientific and technological knowledge to the economy,
- integration of teaching, scientific and artistic work, and
- publishing activities related to scientific research and artistic projects.

4.4. Internationalization of universities and development of joint study programs

The University will direct its efforts toward strengthening its educational, scientific, and artistic recognition at both the national and international levels. This includes, among other things, the implementation of study programs and the development of research and artistic projects aimed at attracting foreign students, teachers, researchers, and artists from around the world.

In addition, the University will focus on developing new joint study programs with universities in the Republic of Croatia, within the European Union, as well as with universities outside the EU that are interested in long-term educational and scientific

cooperation.

The strategic goals in this area are:

- strengthening international educational, scientific, and artistic recognition,
- involvement in international educational and scientific associations and networks, and
- development of joint study programs and research projects with universities in the Republic of Croatia, the European Union, and the world.

4.5. Development of lifelong learning programs

The University will develop a modern and flexible program framework and lifelong learning content that actively respond to labor market demands, lifelong learning models, and examples of best practices from European universities. This framework will support formal education (higher education, retraining, professional development, and certification), non-formal education (training during and for employment, various social activities, and personal development), and informal education (acquiring knowledge, skills, and social attitudes), all complementary to the University's regular study programs.

The University will develop an e-learning infrastructure that enables the delivery of lifelong learning programs through the use of new technologies. It will also develop structured corporate lifelong learning programs (so-called Corporate Academies), offering customized educational content for additional training, retraining, professional development, and specialized seminars, provided either on company premises or online for selected user groups.

The University will support companies in developing their own corporate educational programs.

The strategic objectives in this area are:

- meeting the prescribed standards, and obtaining a national license for the development and implementation of lifelong learning programs,
- creating a diverse and flexible offer of individual and corporate lifelong learning programs, and
- creation and development of personnel, institutional, infrastructural and organizational prerequisites for the implementation of lifelong learning programs.

4.6. Development of international cooperation

Through international cooperation, higher education institutions create the conditions for joint collaboration in areas of particular interest, with the aim of strengthening their own capacities and achieving mutual benefits.

Through bilateral and multilateral international cooperation, the University will further develop its educational, scientific, and research potential, as well as the foundations for individual and institutional networking and collaboration. Special attention will be given to bilateral cooperation with interested universities in developing joint study programs and research projects, as well as initiatives that strengthen educational and scientific capacities.

A continued commitment to ensuring international mobility for students, teachers, and

researchers remains a key priority, serving as an important tool in enhancing the international recognition of the University as an innovative and entrepreneurially oriented institution.

The strategic goals in this area are:

- networking and use of multilateral platforms for international educational and scientific cooperation,
- development of joint projects to increase the networking of students and teachers,
- strengthening international visibility through active participation in international professional and scientific associations,
- participation in projects that strengthen academic and scientific potentials as holders and partners, and
- bilateral cooperation on the creation, development, and implementation of study programs for domestic and foreign students.

4.7. Human resources development, mobility of students, teaching, and non-teaching staff

Human resource management represents an important strategic component of the University. One of the key prerequisites for the success of any organization is its people and their contribution to achieving strategic commitments and goals.

The university community is unique in that its teachers and researchers are required to continuously develop within both the scientific-research and teaching domains. However, it is also necessary to foster other areas of personal and institutional development and to continuously implement various activities adapted to the specific characteristics of the university environment.

The University will take into account all aspects of individual development, as well as other factors that contribute to achieving its strategic objectives. Numerous activities will be directed toward the development of both teaching and non-teaching staff, as well as toward fostering the potential of students throughout their studies through the use of various platforms.

The strategic goals in this area are:

- fostering academic excellence in education and research,
- encouraging business excellence and sustainability within the framework of corporate social responsibility,
- development of ethical values on which education and research will be carried out,
- development of an academic career management system, and
- development of educational platforms to foster personal and institutional development.

The development and networking of the higher education area in Europe provides great opportunities for academic mobility, i.e. the mobility of researchers with the aim of participating in international research projects, and students with the aim of doing internships. Academic mobility achieves educational and scientific goals, as well as wider social goals at the national and EU level. The use of the Erasmus mobility platform ensures the implementation of important strategic goals of the University.

The strategic objectives in this area are:

- encouraging students, teaching and non-teaching staff to Erasmus academic mobility,
- Increasing the number of incoming and outgoing students through the Erasmus program, and
- encouraging students to mobility through the use of other platforms to carry out internships abroad.

4.8. Continuous development of quality assurance systems

The establishment of a quality assurance system is a legal obligation, but also an important need in creating key academic prerequisites for the development of a modern university. Quality assurance offers numerous tools that can be used to achieve strategic goals and develop prerequisites for the realization of the overall strategy in the field of education, research and artistic work. The quality assurance system enables continuous evaluations of study programs and overall activities, both by expert committees and students, as well as the necessary institutional and program accreditation. The system should take special account of meeting national and EU standards in the field of higher education, but also the necessary conditions for accreditation by international associations and organizations that give added value to the university and study programs.

The strategic goals in this area are:

- the creation of a comprehensive quality assurance system,
- continuous application of all national and international standards in the operation of the university and the implementation of study programs,
- development of the Quality Assurance Centre with the aim of developing the internal quality assurance system, providing analytical and expert support to the management for decision-making, and training of human resources for the implementation of quality assurance policies and activities,
- ensuring regular external evaluation in the field of development of study programs and university activities.

4.9. Cooperation with the social community

The University is an active member of the academic and scholarly community, an engaged participant in social developments, and a responsible stakeholder in the sustainable development of the economy, civil society, and the well-being of the wider community — a commitment that will remain a lasting orientation of the University.

Another permanent orientation of the University will be the development of knowledge, innovations, and solutions that foster the promotion of social responsibility. Aware of its own responsibility for community development, the University will promote values that contribute to the advancement and prosperity of society through sustainable development, as well as to the personal growth of its students, with the aim of cultivating the values upon which the future economic and social development of the Republic of Croatia and the European Union can be built.

The strategic objectives in this area are:

- promoting the principles of social responsibility and sustainable development

- through study programs and research,
- cooperating with local, regional, national, and international bodies in encouraging social responsibility among young people, and
- involving individuals and organizations in shaping the strategic orientation of the University within specific areas.

4.10. Transformation of professional study programs into university programs

The University currently offers ten undergraduate and seven graduate study programs, of which only three undergraduate programs are university-level, while the others are professional programs. This situation stems from the fact that the University was established in 2020 through the transformation of a polytechnic. The process of transforming professional study programs into university programs is still in its early stages, partly due to objective circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which slowed development, and the need to meet the staffing requirements prescribed by the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE). Preparations for reaccreditation have also slowed down and shifted attention away from transformation activities.

Strategic objectives in this area:

- complete the transformation of selected professional undergraduate programs into university programs within five years, accompanied by the development of new curricula and the reaccreditation of study programs,
- increase the proportion of teaching staff holding scientific-teaching titles in programs undergoing transformation to meet the requirements for university-level status,
- develop new university graduate and postgraduate programs derived from the transformed undergraduate programs, ensuring vertical progression for students,
- establish a quality assurance system to monitor the relevance of study programs through regular analyses of employability, and student and employer satisfaction,
- promote interdisciplinarity and a research-oriented approach in teaching to involve students in projects, laboratory work, and cooperation with industry,
- secure additional funding sources (national and EU funds) for program development and modernization, as well as for professional development of teaching staff,
- enhance international visibility and cooperation by integrating transformed programs into European university networks and international mobility programs, and
- establish a Center for Program Development Support to coordinate the transformation process, provide administrative and methodological support, and monitor the achievement of strategic indicators.

4.11. Attracting a Greater Number of International Students

Despite growing interest in studying in Croatia, the number of international students remains relatively low compared to other European countries. The main reasons include administrative barriers, particularly the complex and lengthy visa and residence permit procedures for students from outside the European Union. Additional challenges include a limited offering of study programs in English, insufficient international visibility of higher education institutions, and a lack of systematic support for international students upon

arrival. Furthermore, the accreditation process for study programs in English remains as complex as the initial accreditation of new programs in Croatian.

The University will actively cooperate with relevant state authorities to simplify and expedite visa and residence permit procedures. At the same time, efforts will be made to establish improved information systems and digital communication channels to ensure that international students receive timely information and support.

Special attention will be given to the development of study programs in English. University staff will be encouraged to adapt existing programs and develop new ones aligned with the needs of the international labor market.

The University will further strengthen its international presence through partnerships with foreign institutions, participation in international education fairs, and targeted promotional activities. In collaboration with the Office for International Cooperation, orientation and mentoring programs will be developed to help international students integrate into academic and everyday life in Croatia.

The University will also seek to expand scholarship and financial support programs, in cooperation with public and private partners, to attract excellent students from around the world.

Strategic objectives:

- increase the number of international students at the University,
- accredit and deliver selected study programs in English,
- establish an effective support and advisory system for international students,
- enhance the University's international visibility through strategic partnerships, promotion, and joint projects.

4.12. Development of Extracurricular Activities

Extracurricular activities form an important part of university life and contribute to the holistic development of students, their competencies, social responsibility, and creative potential. By developing systematic, inclusive, and high-quality extracurricular programs, the University strengthens community ties, fosters civic and professional skills, and increases its visibility and attractiveness within the wider community.

Strategic objectives:

- increase the number and diversity of extracurricular activities available to students across all study programs,
- provide institutional support for student initiatives in the fields of culture, sports, science, entrepreneurship, and social engagement,
- link extracurricular activities with the development of key employability and lifelong learning competencies,
- encourage collaboration between the University, local community, and business sector in the development of joint projects and programs, and
- establish a system for recognizing and evaluating extracurricular activities through student portfolios and Diploma Supplements.

4.13. Development of scientific and professional project activities

Scientific and professional project activities are key to fulfilling the University's mission in the areas of innovation, research, and knowledge transfer. They enable students, teachers, and researchers to apply theoretical knowledge in practice, promote interdisciplinary collaboration, and strengthen the University's competitiveness at the national and international levels. Particular emphasis is placed on commercial and competitive projects that foster knowledge transfer to the economy and society while generating additional funding sources.

Strategic objectives:

- increase the number of scientific-research and professional projects with national and international partners,
- encourage student participation in project activities to develop practical skills and professional competencies,
- provide institutional support for the application, management, and implementation of commercial and competitive projects,
- strengthen collaboration with businesses, institutions, and non-governmental organizations in the areas of innovation and knowledge transfer, and
- develop distinctive projects that contribute to scientific excellence, economic development, and social responsibility.

5. Conclusion

In its development so far, the VERN' Group has established the essential foundations for a new leap forward in higher education through the founding of the University and the development of research capacities. The experience gained and the successful management of past challenges provide a solid basis for continued progress in higher education through an innovative and entrepreneurial approach and socially responsible action.

Fully aware of the challenges associated with establishing a new higher education institution in the Republic of Croatia — as well as the broader challenges currently facing higher education in Croatia and the EU — we approached the preparation of this strategy and the definition of its goals with responsibility and diligence. This process will require significant human, organizational, and financial resources. A clear vision and mission, together with the goals we have set, will enable continuous development based on short- and medium-term action plans and regular evaluation of the strategy's implementation through a quality assurance system and other instruments.