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Navigating the AI Era: How Project BrAIn is Upgrading Croatian Education

Information from Croatia

Project **BrAIn** (Application of Artificial Intelligence-Based Digital Technologies in Education) is Croatia's flagship initiative for the responsible integration of artificial intelligence into primary and secondary education. BrAIn is systematically building the human capital, supporting regulatory frameworks, and developing the technological infrastructure necessary to ensure that Croatian students and teachers become informed and critical users of AI, while safeguarding digital sovereignty and data protection. This project is co-financed by the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), and the total value of the project, which runs until 2029, is 16 million EUR.

CHALLENGES ADDRESSED BY THE PROJECT

BrAIn is designed to tackle five critical gaps identified in Croatia's educational landscape. First, there was an absence of a structured AI literacy pathway. The project addresses this by introducing a comprehensive, age-appropriate curriculum spanning lower to upper secondary education.

Furthermore, BrAIn responds to the need for large-scale, continuous professional development that empowers teachers to use AI as a pedagogical tool rather than perceive it as a replacement. To strengthen evidence-based policymaking, the project incorporates rigorous longitudinal and action research, ensuring that national policies are grounded in scientific evidence, particularly in areas such as student wellbeing and digital safety. The project also addresses the challenge of deploying AI in classrooms while respecting children's rights, privacy, and pedagogical integrity. Finally, BrAIn is building independent, open-source infrastructure to support long-term implementation while preserving national strategic autonomy.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

A major milestone of the BrAIn project has been the development and piloting of the **first national AI curriculum**, titled *"Artificial Intelligence: From Concept to Application"*, which positions it among the earliest such initiatives in the EU. The curriculum is currently implemented in primary education (grades 5-6 and 7-8) as an extracurricular activity and in secondary education (grades 2-3) as an elective subject, with full coverage of secondary schools planned from the next school year. The pilot phase has been carried out at significant scale, involving 240 schools, nearly 5,200 students, and more than 400 teachers. In pedagogical terms, the curriculum places strong emphasis on critical thinking, ethical literacy, bias recognition, and responsible behaviour in digital environments. Learning is designed to be interactive and student-centered, relying on inquiry-based approaches, play, and practical problem-solving.

Drawing on pilot research findings, BrAIn has issued **tailored recommendations for students, parents, teachers, school principals, and education policymakers**. These cover safe technology use, prevention of electronic violence, and the balance between digital and everyday life. The recommendations serve as practical tools for schools and families to maximize the benefits of AI while minimizing risks to child wellbeing.

Another key achievement is the establishment of a **comprehensive research framework**. This includes a longitudinal study which represents the first study of its kind in Croatia (2023-2029) and tracks digital technology habits and their impact on students' emotional, social, and cognitive wellbeing. In addition, action research was carried out during the 2024/2025 pilot year, involving 28 teachers from a range of school types, and providing real-time feedback to support the refinement of the curriculum. The project also generates scientific outputs, including the development of a comprehensive Framework for Digital Literacy and Student Wellbeing, as well as peer-reviewed insights that are expected to contribute to policy discussions at EU level on artificial intelligence in education.

In April 2026, **Guidelines for Responsible and Pedagogically Grounded AI Application** were published, marking the first official regulatory instrument for the use of AI in classrooms in Croatia. The guidelines emphasize human oversight, ensure compliance with GDPR and the EU AI Act, and provide a clear distinction between pedagogically guided use and unregulated automation. They are designed as a living document, allowing for regular updates in line with technological developments.

Finally, the project has significantly invested in capacity building through a **"Teachers for Teachers"** model, which promotes peer learning and professional exchange. Through a combination of workshops, webinars, e-courses, and continuous communication channels, educators are supported in integrating AI into their teaching practice and staying informed about emerging tools, policies, and good practices.

UPCOMING MILESTONES

The next key step of the BrAIn project is the rollout of a **Virtual Learning Assistant**, which is currently in its final testing phase. The tool supports students across a wide range of subjects and is expected to expand to full curriculum coverage. It provides personalised learning support in Croatian, accessible at any time through text and voice interaction, and adapts to individual learning needs and pace. The system preserves the central role of the teacher, with AI offering tailored support while teachers define learning goals and guide the process. It is designed with strong safeguards for data protection, operating on an opt-in basis with parental consent and without sharing sensitive student data, such as grades.

In parallel, Croatia is investing in dedicated national infrastructure to support the use of artificial intelligence in education. A **Mini AI Data Center** / Supercomputer is being developed to ensure that educational data remains securely stored and processed within national jurisdiction.

This infrastructure will enable the use of advanced AI models tailored to the Croatian language and education system. By ensuring that AI systems can be run locally, it strengthens data security, transparency, and long-term operational independence. Together, the Virtual Learning Assistant and the supporting infrastructure represent an important step towards a more resilient and sovereign digital education system, capable of harnessing the benefits of artificial intelligence while safeguarding public interests.

In conclusion, project BrAIn is not merely a national EdTech initiative, it represents a replicable approach for Member States seeking to harness artificial intelligence in education while preserving strategic autonomy. It demonstrates that child safety and innovation can be mutually reinforcing when ethics and pedagogy are embedded in design, and that open-source AI and local computing capacity can deliver high-quality, multilingual educational tools aligned with European values and data protection standards. Croatia stands ready to share its experience, including its curriculum, guidelines, and technical solutions, and to contribute to a coordinated European approach to artificial intelligence in education that is safe, inclusive, and student-centred.