

## Feedback from the Department of Anatomy, School of Medicine, University of Zagreb on the LEANBody Project

The LEANBody project has been a transformative initiative, bringing together anatomists from leading institutions in Central European medical education, including the University of Pécs, Masaryk University, and the University of Zagreb, supported by experts from the University of Cambridge and Karolinska Institutet. This collaboration addressed pressing challenges, particularly the preparation of Central European medical schools for the World Federation of Medical Education (WFME) accreditation.

By addressing weaknesses in traditional methodologies, the initiative aligns Central European medical education with international quality standards. Through collaboration among leading universities, the project tackled critical regional challenges, such as high dropout rates, mental health concerns, and the need to foster professional attitudes.

Through the collaborative efforts facilitated by the LEANBody project, we gained invaluable insights into the history and evolution of anatomy teaching. This encouraged us to critically evaluate our own practices and reflect on traditional teaching methods, helping to modernize our approach while preserving fundamental principles. Importantly, this reflection raised questions about whether certain elements of traditional anatomy teaching are indispensable and cannot be eliminated without a significant impact on the quality or prestige of education.

Insights into educational psychology provided during the project proved particularly beneficial. Understanding the cognitive and psychological aspects of anatomy education has opened pathways for enhancing student engagement and ensuring the achievement of learning outcomes. The focus on a student-centred approach further underscored the importance of promoting active learning, critical thinking and student engagement during classes.

Significant role of professional behavioural values and attitudes in anatomy teaching was also highlighted through the project. It was observed that fostering an environment rooted in respect, integrity, and accountability greatly enhances the learning experience. Educators who exemplify these values promote a culture of collaboration, ethical decision-making, and open communication, which positively impacts student engagement and classroom dynamics. Furthermore, the project underscored how such professional attitudes contribute to the development of students' critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, preparing them not only for academic success but also for their future clinical practices.

The project also brought attention to mental health challenges faced by both students and educators. Addressing these challenges highlighted the crucial need for supportive environments that prioritize well-being as a foundation for academic and professional success. Additionally, discussions on sustainability emphasized the importance of integrating eco-conscious practices into medical education, aligning with broader global efforts toward environmental responsibility.

The project workshops were particularly impactful, providing a platform for networking and exchanging ideas. This fostered a supportive community of educators, encouraging collaboration and professional growth. Participants shared best practices, embraced innovation, and developed practical solutions to common challenges, strengthening the collective capacity to advance medical education.

Following the Cambridge workshop, the project team continued to explore the concept of constructive alignment, broadening our understanding of the topic. Within the Department, this led to a

reassessment of our perspectives on teaching and learning in the Anatomy course. To address areas of misalignment, curriculum changes were initiated during the 2022/2023 academic year and fully implemented in 2023/2024. Adopting novel approaches is inherently challenging, requiring both professional support and a thoughtful, critical approach to implementation. Achieving a strong consensus within the Department is vital to the process. After critically evaluating the changes made, we identified two key factors for successfully introducing such changes. First, it is essential to recognize that changes may not yield exclusively positive outcomes. Educators tasked with implementing these changes should remain mindful of the specific context and environment. Furthermore, the ongoing evaluation and adaptation of novel pedagogical strategies are crucial, ensuring they complement rather than oppose traditional methods. Second, introducing changes demands significant teacher commitment and must ultimately demonstrate clear, long-term cost-effectiveness and sustainability. In response to these challenges, we have refined our approach to implementing constructive alignment in the curriculum for the 2024/2025 academic year.

Following the workshop in Pécs, the project team recognized the importance of strengthening student support and well-being services. While our School already involves students in all Faculty management structures (such as the Management Board, Faculty Council, and various Faculty Committees) and offers exceptional opportunities through numerous Student Societies and extracurricular activities, as well as organized support for students with learning difficulties and vulnerable groups (including those facing mental health problems), it became evident after the workshop that there is still substantial room for improvement. As anatomy teachers responsible for the largest course in the first year of study, we have observed rising levels of anxiety among students, as well as organizational and motivational challenges in meeting academic expectations. Additionally, an increasing number of students are falling behind in the course. This trend is reflected in the declining pass rates: currently, around 75-80% of students in the Croatian program and 50-60% in the English program pass all their exams in the first year, compared to pass rates of approximately 90% and 75-80%, respectively, just five years ago. These trends underscore a significant decline in student success, which may be attributed to challenges in adapting to the rigorous demands of the first year, particularly those of the Anatomy course. The workshop in Pécs provided an excellent platform for exchanging experiences, particularly regarding the importance of addressing student vulnerability and demonstrating empathy while implementing methods to foster professionalism. Following the workshop, we also engaged in discussions with the faculty administration to emphasize that prioritizing student well-being is not only as important as ensuring they achieve high levels of knowledge and competence but is also a prerequisite for achieving these goals. Due to the efforts of the Croatian project leader and the Head of the Department, additional measures were initiated at the School of Medicine in Zagreb to raise awareness about the critical importance of supporting students' mental health and overall well-being. This led to the first organizational steps toward implementing this initiative. During the meeting in Pécs, the importance of safeguarding the mental health and well-being of teachers was also emphasized. The growing number of enrolled students, as well as students experiencing motivational, emotional, and organizational difficulties has significantly increased the demands placed on educators. To address this, organizational changes were introduced at the Department level to alleviate the direct burden on teachers and mitigate the risk of burnout. Furthermore, communication was established with the faculty administration to develop a protocol for providing support to teachers when needed.

The final project event, the symposium organized at the University of Zagreb School of Medicine, brought together our project partners and all the teachers of the Department of Anatomy, many of whom actively participated as presenters. The event also attracted numerous anatomy professors from other biomedical faculties across Croatia, as well as from various institutions within and beyond the

University of Zagreb. Notably, the symposium welcomed significant participation from anatomy professors in neighboring countries, particularly Serbia. In addition to showcasing the project results, the symposium highlighted the critical importance of recognizing the protracted brain development that continues through adolescence and the emotional and cognitive maturation unique to first-year students. This underscores the need to adapt teaching methods and communication styles to effectively address the evolving needs and expectations of the new generation of students.

In conclusion, the LEANBody project has had a profound impact on our department, equipping us to enhance our teaching practices and address future challenges effectively. We deeply appreciate the opportunity to participate in this project and are confident that its outcomes will lead to lasting improvements in anatomy teaching and medical education at University of Zagreb School of Medicine.