

Title:

**Mapping factors of low efficiency of studying in
higher education in Serbia**

Authors:

Isidora Jarić, dorajar@eunet.rs

Martina Vukasović, mvukasovic@cep.edu.rs

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides analysis on how teachers and students of 5 universities in Serbia (Belgrade, Novi Sad, Nis, and Kragujevac) perceive problems with efficiency of studying, with respect to the new, “Bologna” organisation of studies. The empirical foundation for this paper is composed of questionnaires distributed to students and teachers of the five aforementioned institutions and a semi-structured in-depth interview with students and teachers of the two faculties of the University of Belgrade. The results presented point to key factors affecting efficiency of studying, as well as structural changes in power relations between different social actors.

Key words: efficiency of studying, Bologna reforms, university, teachers, students, education, Serbia

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Until 2005, when the legislation accepting the Bologna degree system was adopted, undergraduate programmes offered by public universities were in most cases 4 years long (nominal duration), in engineering and some of the health sciences 5 years long and 6 years long in medicine. Prior to 2005 legislation, progress through and completion of higher education was very closely regulated. While the legislation adopted in 2005 is less prescriptive in other areas, it remained rather detailed in terms of how institutions should reform their study programmes: three cycle degree system was introduced, the focus on learning outcomes and the use of ECTS was underlined, and there were rather detailed descriptions on how assessment of students should be organised.

One of the key arguments in favour of the reform of higher education in Serbia in line with the Bologna Process is the perceived low efficiency of studying. Policy makers and stakeholder representatives tend to agree that the number of students dropping out from higher education and the actual duration of studies are unacceptably high (although they would disagree on exact numbers). The main explanation for this situation was the “outdated and rigid study structure” (Turajlić, 2004).

This understanding also initiated internal analysis of efficiency by each university. In some cases there are reported in the news:

“...Comparing these results, with results of the students who have graduated during 2006/07 academic year, it may seem that the efficiency of studying has increased, given that the average time to completion went from 7.84 (2006/07) to 7.69 (2007/08) and grade average from 7.94 to 7.96. The proportion of students completing their studies on time went from 13.06 to 15.96. ... -

said Neda Bokan, Vice Rector for study affairs at the University of Belgrade... "(Article by V. Andrić. "Average duration of studies in Belgrade almost 8 years", published Danas daily newspaper, 28/05/09, translation by Vukasović)

Given that the methodology of such analysis is not transparent; such results need to be taken with reserve. There are, however, other quantitative studies of efficiency of higher education based on existing data collected at the system level, show that, for the pre-2005 study programmes efficiency is rather low (Vukasović, 2007):

- the dropout rate is estimated to be 45%, i.e. the completion rate is 55%. However, it should be noted that this is just an estimate since the information system of students and the prolongation of studies do not allow for an exact calculation;
- the average duration of studies (on the basis of those who completed) is longer than the nominal duration for all study programmes. For example: for 2-year vocational studies the average duration is 4.2, for 4-year university studies the average duration is almost 6.8 years and for 6-year studies it is 7.6 years;
- the repetition rate is highest for the second year of studies (almost 46%), followed by the third year of studies (around 40%), and the first year of studies (more than 25%);
- it takes, on average, 1.45 years to enrol into the next year of study.

The bivariate analysis of previously available quantitative data also shows statistically significant correlations between, on the one hand various indicators of efficiency of studying, and on the other hand, gender and education of parents. Furthermore, there are significant correlations between the type of secondary and the type of higher education, suggesting implicit tracking through the education system.

However, quantitative studies so far provided information on the scope of low efficiency of studying in higher education and indicated a connection between some elements of the SEB of

students and their success in studying. They haven't, however, thoroughly analysed other possible factors affecting success (and thus contributing to low efficiency of studies) such as intrinsic motivation of students, study support systems, support from peers and parents, workload, etc. In addition, the presented study provides a comparison between old (pre-2005) and new ("Bologna") programmes in terms of efficiency of studying and information to enable deeper understanding of issues of socio-economic inequality in higher education, thus also allowing for comparison with similar studies done abroad or internationally on accessibility and affordability of higher education (HEFCE, 2005; Marks, 2005; Müller and Karle, 1993; Opheim, 2004; Peck, 2001; Wong, 1998).

CONCEPTS AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The main concept under study is the efficiency of higher education, with respect to the teaching function of higher education. As was previously stated, efficiency is considered to be low if:

- the studies are prolonged beyond their nominal duration,
- if the students are repeating certain years of study,
- if it takes them more than a year to enrol into the next year of study and/or
- if there is dropout from higher education, i.e. completion is not 100%.

Therefore, the indicators of low efficiency of studying are:

- *completion rate* - refers to the ratio between the number of those who have completed higher education and the number of those who enrolled in the appropriate academic year (e.g. 4 years prior to the year for which completion data are used if programmes are expected to last 4 years). This is relatively easy to calculate in systems which do not

allow for prolongation of studies or which closely follow the progress of each student. Neither is the case in Serbia. This is also used to estimate the dropout rate (as completion rate subtracted from 100), although this is a rather simplistic understanding of dropout;

- *duration of studies* – calculated as a difference between the time of graduation and the time of enrolment for the first time in the first year of studies. This is also connected to:
 - o *absolute prolongation* - refers to the total prolongation of studies with respect to the expected duration of studies,
 - o *relative prolongation* - determines the amount of prolongation for each year of study;
- *progress* - refers to the time it takes to enrol into the next year of study;
- *repetition rate* – refers to the ratio between the number of students who repeat a specific year of study, compared to the number of students who are enrolled in that year of study.

The underlying assumption is that efficiency of higher education is related to various dimensions of students' socio-economic background, student workload, choice and motivation for studying and level of alienation from the academic community. Having this in mind, it was necessary to explore perceptions of both students and teachers related to the role of higher education, student workload, academic environment etc. In addition, the data on students included information on various elements of their socio-economic background, previous education, motivation and expectations from higher education, higher education experience so far (attendance, passed exams etc), as well as perception to what extent these expectations were met during the course of studying and their perception about the characteristics of their study programme in terms of content, organisation, workload etc. When it comes to teachers, they are those who are significantly contributing to the institutional setting and the academic habitus (Bourdieu, 1988) and are therefore in the position to increase or decrease student alienation

from the academic community. Their attitudes towards the role of higher education in general, role and essence of universities in particular, towards mass higher education, expectations from students all affect how they would position themselves with respect to diversity of students in terms of these expectations, understanding of the support students have or lack, position towards organisational and financial investment into various counselling services which might prevent drop out or increase efficiency of studying (Moortgat, 1996). Therefore, the data collected for teachers focused on the aforementioned elements.

The methodology included:

- quantitative analysis, by way of student and teacher questionnaires collected for a representative stratified sample of students and teachers of four public universities in Serbia, and
- qualitative analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews with students and teachers from two faculties of the University of Belgrade.

RESULTS

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

The first phase of the research included gathering and analysis of quantitative data, obtained by way of questionnaires to students and staff. The intended and actual sample is given in Table 1.

(table 1 about here)

The stratification of the sample was done on the basis of previous research and included stratification in terms of field of study (5 fields were chosen, with equal number for each field: social sciences, law, technical sciences, health sciences and natural sciences) as well as type of programme (essentially connected to the year of study: Bologna, non Bologna and the so-called “apsolventi”ⁱ, with the ratio between types 7:7:4). In terms of the stratification of teaching staff, apart from the distribution amongst the fields (equal number of questionnaires per institution), further effort was made to ensure adequate number of different academic ranks (from teaching assistant to full professor). The choice of fields was with the goal of adequate representation of hard-applied, hard-pure, soft-applied and soft-pure disciplines (Becher, 1994).

The cross-tabulation between universities and fields is given in Table 2.

(table 2 about here)

As can be seen, even though the sample is not complete for the University of Novi Sad, the distribution between the fields is more or less equal (i.e. the 25% missing is evenly distributed). Another departure from the foreseen sample is in the field of medicine and, to a lesser extent in the field of social sciences and natural sciences at the University of Belgrade. The key reason for this, in the case of the natural sciences or social sciences, is that the sizes of the student groups at specific years of study (i.e. specific type of programmes) were bigger or smaller than what was expected. Additional problems in gathering data for Bologna type programmes were encountered in the case of medicine, due to changing class schedules. In order to counteract this problem, prior to statistical analysis, appropriate weights to data were applied.

On the basis of data from the questionnaire, two important coefficients were constructed:

1. **coefficient of inefficiency**, calculated as the sum of squares of number of repetitions of each study year, therefore having the minimum value of 0 (students that did not repeat any study year) to (for this data set) 23. This way of calculating the inefficiency coefficient allows for distinguishing between e.g. students who may have repeated two different years only once from students who have repeated the same study year twice. The latter case may include a stronger influence of personal characteristics (e.g. poor working habits) while the former may include a stronger influence of the institutional setting (e.g. too high workload for one study year). This decision was further supported by the findings that there is recurring inefficiency, i.e. those who repeat at least one year at least once are more likely to repeat again;
2. **coefficient of alienation**, calculated on the basis of responses related to relationships of the student with the total of 7 individual or groups in the institution (peers, professors, mentor, administrative services), as the average of Likert-type scale responses. Thus, the value of the coefficient may be between 1 (indicating very bad relationships) and 5 (indicating excellent relationships). Students had the possibility to choose not to respond to these questions, as well.

These two coefficients were essentially used as dependent variables for this paper, although further analysis will include investigation into possible spurious relationships between these two variables as well.

In terms of individual characteristics of students, it is interesting to observe the differences in student expectations and their perception of fulfilment of these expectations (Table 3). For the two most prominent expectations – *acquiring competences for employment* and *decreasing the possibility of unemployment* – the fulfilment is not as high as the expectation. However, the analysis does not show any statistically significant correlation between fulfilment of expectations and coefficient of inefficiency.

(table 3 about here)

In addition to this, although the result is somewhat to be expected, students who perceive their workload to be more manageable tend to have lower coefficient of inefficiency. It should be noted that the perception of workload is basically formed out of interaction between students' personal characteristics (including motivation and working habits) and the study programme as such. Therefore, it is of importance to see that the students studying within new study programmes (i.e. Bologna programmes) have exhibited somewhat better results: only 4,6% of Bologna students repeated their first year of study, while 16,8% of pre-Bologna students repeated their first year. Similar comparisons for higher years of study were not possible due to short implementation time of the Bologna study programmes.

When it comes to coefficient of alienation, the average alienation is 2.42, the best relationship students have with their peers (average score 3.85) and other students (3.71), while the worst relationship is with the faculty authorities (average score 1.93). Students also found communication with administrative staff more difficult than communication with teachers (both in class, and outside of the class). There is statistically relevant correlation between the coefficient of alienation and the % of exams passed so far, while with other variables related to efficiency or the coefficient of inefficiency there were no statistically relevant correlations.

Finally, it was interesting to observe that, contrary to previous studies which detected some statistically relevant correlations between rate of passing exams, or rate of repeating years (Vukasović, 2007); there is no statistically relevant correlation between the coefficient of inefficiency and the education of parents. Although this should be investigated further, one

potential explanation may lie in the fact that the coefficient of inefficiency captures more detailed information about repeating years.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The main aim of this phase was to try to understand through personal and more intimate perspective of our interviewees deeper reasons of certain statistical and social trends related to the problem of efficiency of studying. In this phase, we were concentrated on certain specific symbolic points that we mapped through the analysis of data collected in the previous phase of the research. In that sense we tried to make a step further in understanding deeper levels of societal and personal dynamics of the social actors who are participating in the process of higher education.

The notion of efficiency of studying understands relational process of many different social actors. These actors enter in different complex and contradictory social relations of cooperation and/or conflict within this process that could follow different, sometimes even opposite, logics of thinking and acting. The proclaimed intention to increase efficiency of studying in higher education institutions (which is a one of the official goals of Bologna reform) and new institutional settings derived from it are, in the terms and discourse of social analysis, in parallel dialogue with many different social structures that could follow different social trajectories (Connell, 1987), be in different interrelations of overlap or cancellation of each other and/or other social structures outside the field of educational process and its institutional framework. Therefore, we start from the understanding that the only way to understand why certain institutional framework leads to a certain level of efficiency of educational process is to research its relations with other social structures through the analysis of its place and its role in them.

The empirical data used for the qualitative part of the study was collected by way of in-depth semi-structured interviews focusing on certain topics/themes/areas/fields of interest, following the internal logic of every particular interviewee, different societal and structural layers within his/her narratives related to various social experiences, practices, opinions or beliefs. On the basis of this, we tried to map major issues of concern to our interviewees related to efficiency of studying, and offer a fresh look on complicated and sometimes inconsistent character of efficiency of higher education within the particular institutional and societal context of higher education system in the contemporary Serbian society.

We performed this part of qualitative research in the form of two case studies of two faculties on the University of Belgrade: one faculty within the social sciences group and one faculty within the technical sciences group, in order to compare different disciplinary perspectives and needs. In each of the chosen departments, 10 in-depth interviews were performed, 7 with students and 3 with teachers.

The analysis of the interviews revealed a map of reasons possibly influencing efficiency of studying, which, on the basis of students' and teacher's narratives, can be classified in four major groups (all further divided into subgroups):

1. Individual

- a. Health related
- b. Psychological
- c. Other

2. Family

- a. Economic
- b. Geographical
- c. Related to upbringing and socialising role of the family

3. Institutional
 - a. Previous education (high school)
 - b. Faculty, discipline
 - c. Education system as such
4. Social

Individual

Within the group if **individual reasons** for decrease in efficiency of studying, students talk of several different life situations which have affected or could potentially affect their education achievement. Amongst these are different health reasons that may have affected their poor performance on exams and hence their failure to pass into the next year of studies, by forcing them to take a break from active studying:

"I had a long break... due to problems with my spine." (Z-AP-MA-DS-3)ⁱⁱ

Sometimes such health reasons may lead to circumstances in which other types of factors become dominant in student perceptions of their own low efficiency of studying. These may include a sense of "lagging behind one's own generation", which then sometimes lead to a psychological "blockage":

"... I repeated the second year of studies. I made a long break due to health and family reasons. The third, fourth and fifth year of studies went regularly, I increased my grade average and passed 23 exams in two and a half years. Since I finished my lecturesⁱⁱⁱ, the last year, due to a psychological blockage, I have been progressing very slowly..." (Z-AP-MA-DS-3)

An important group identified by students are various **psychological reasons**, varying from some *lack of seriousness* when it comes to their student tasks

„... there is this laidback group; there are those who do not take their studies seriously...” (M-IV-FF-MM-3)

... and *indolence* when it comes to their fulfilment...

“... I become lazy after I completed my second year. I had this very difficult summer, since I spent the whole summer studying. I was cramming for ... one of the two most difficult exams in the entire programme... and after I passed that exam, actually, immediately afterwards the third year started and I, when other started studying and prepare for some tests, I sort of rested and relaxed after continuous studying during the summer. And then it started “I do not have to do this now, I can do it in January, or in April” and so... some time last summer I decided that I can not spend another summer in Belgrade and study... so I gave myself a break, saying “you can repeat one year”, with the idea that I start fresh now and pass as many exams from the third year and enrol into the next year” (Z-IV-FF-MM-1)

... to *ignoring* institutional demands and demands from the role of student:

“the reading materials are really good, interesting. But, I get to one topic, and then go online to check it out, and then something catches my attention. I do not have the habit to sit down and cram.” (M-I-FF-IJ-1)

Many students also testify about the phenomenon of *relaxing*, either after a particularly heavy study year, or towards the end of studies:

"I completed my tasks rather regularly, only now I have prolonged my status as apsolvent^v, because I am working now... I have 6 exams, out of 34 in total. It was important for me not to repeat any years. However, when I enrolled into the fifth year [final year], I become relaxed; I was already earning money for myself... I did not feel so afraid any longer." (Z-AP-MA-IJ-2)

There are reasons that affect, or have affected, efficiency of studies, related to emotional states, such as *being in love*...

"I had some emotional problems. I ended a relationship that lasted a year and then went into a new relationship. I am pretty confused. My personal life is completely overshadowing the school. The school is not my first priority. I do not know if I will be able to catch up and complete all the requirements to take exams. I am not sure if I will be able to catch up with all those essays. I have fulfilled tasks that have been strictly limited in terms of time. Where the deadlines were flexible, I failed. I procrastinate a lot..." (M-I-FF-IJ-1)

... and other sorts of "*force majeure*", that may not be channelled properly by the institution or the higher education system as such, but that may be addressed by *emphatic teachers*. Many students complain about lack of empathy from teachers, empathy that could be systematically supported within the system.

"what [affects efficiency]... higher powers: love, death, fortune... Fortune has a short term positive effect. I am not sure how long it will serve me. Then, teachers have an effect ... Whether they empathise with students. Empathy of professors towards students is important..." (M-I-FF-IJ-1)

Within the responses of interviewees, there is a group of reasons that were classified as individual, but actually refer to quality of prior schooling, which did not induce appropriate habits.

Many of the respondents speak of importance of *developed working habits*, and see this as one of the key factors for successful completion of study tasks in the new (Bologna) system of higher education.

“...to complete all exams you have to give up your social life to a large, very large extent. When I completed the first year of studies, I realised that, within the year, I had less than a month for myself. Everything else was continuous work. Therefore... working habits... are very important...”
(Z-II-FF-PL-1)

“I did not develop working habits, and now I need them. This is why I struggle...” (M-II-MA-DS-2)

Family

In times of economic crisis and long-lasting process of social transformation (without a clear outcome), the family support seems to be central in the lives of most of our interviewees. Thus, the decision to enrol into higher education, choice of field, place of living (parent's apartment, rented apartment, place in student dorm) etc is almost always determined by family characteristics (socio-economic, geographic). It is somewhat disconcerting that, even when a student manages to enrol into the desired field of study and manages to secure funding for one academic year, s/he is nevertheless exposed to uncertainties of the overall economic situation, without safety nets in the form of student loans that can entirely cover costs related to studying. In this respect, the student does not have the means to survive a potential financial crisis of his own family and ensure support for the following academic year. Therefore, students in Serbia, even when living outside of their home towns while studying, essentially share the economic situation of their primary families. Those who wish to overcome such situation and, despite the

poor economic means of their families, complete their higher education, are often forced to find work:

“... some colleagues do not have means, or their parents do not have means to support them, so they have to work, and then they are not as successful in their studying...” (Z-IV-FF-MM-1)

Naturally, for many of them this means additional pressure of negotiating between commitments in higher education and commitments related to work, especially having in mind that the current system of studying is not particularly supportive to working students^v (Ivošević and Miklavič, 2009:90). Ultimately, this leads to postponing of graduation:

“I’ve tried earlier to organise myself, and work in parallel, since I am in financial difficulties, but that is not possible. You can study and work. I could find work as an apsolvent, I have colleagues who have done so, but then you have no time to study. This is why I am denying myself a lot in order to finish.” (Z-AP-MA-DS-3)

However, some students see this additional workload as incentive to complete their studies as soon as possible:

“I have some friends who work and study and that is really difficult... however, these people are usually amongst the first who graduate... I have two friends who work and study, they are about to finish, one of them is very diligent, much more diligent than I am”. (M-IV-FF-MM-3)

Distance between home town and the place of study, as well as the amount of time spent in public transportation are often cited by respondents to be negatively affecting their efficiency in fulfilling student tasks. In most narratives, **economic** and **geographic** reasons are intertwined: some respondents find leaving family home and long periods of detachment of parents rather

difficult, but also state that, if their economic situation was better, they would be in the position to travel back to their parent's place of residence more frequently.

One particularly interesting group of reasons that are seen to contribute to decreasing efficiency of studying and are connected to the social context of the family include respondents' reflections on **upbringing** and **socialising** practices of their parents, or rather mistakes their parents made in the process (from respondents' perspective, faced with their own higher education experience). It is interesting that in contemplating one's own growing up and nurturing strategies of their parents; respondents' narratives often reveal an ambivalent attitude, in light of the new social context and new social role of an adult:

"I have no habit of sitting down and cramming. I am aware of my resistance... I know this is a problem, and I have a lot of difficulties in overcoming it. My parents have never disciplined me, never forced me, they gave me freedom. Their starting point was that I was intelligent. They never forced me, were never angry with me. They were always saying: "If that is what you want, OK". Everything was up to me..." (M-I-FF-IJ-1)

Institution

The new social context, including new expectations and new desirable modes of conduct, initiated respondents to reconsider their own social and personal experiences in education and the education system as such, from the perspective of their role as a student. Many respondents are rather critical about their **prior (secondary) education**:

“... having in mind the conditions in which secondary education was provided ... and is still provided, generally speaking, I think it could have been of a higher quality...” (M-II-FF-PL-3)

A number of respondents claim that secondary education did not prepare them for studying:

“Interviewer: Did high school, in your opinion, provide adequate preparation for studying?”

Respondent: Well... very little” (M-II-FF-PL-3)

While some respondents go further claiming that secondary education:

“essentially did not... prepare me for life, life that demands survival and struggle, that you can actually do something after you complete high school. That you are able to deal with difficult things and that you can solve problems to your advantage... to learn not to give up” (M-III-MA-DS-4)

All respondents agreed that they have *“lot of... gaps in their knowledge” (Z-IV-FF-MM-1)*, and that the scope of these gaps varies *“from subject to subject, I am rather good in some subjects, and my knowledge is rather poor in others, so, in all, I am not satisfied” (Z-IV-FF-MM-1)*.

A similar critical tone within the respondents' narratives is present in relation to **faculties** they are currently attending. Their complaints and arguments reveal significant deficiencies of the current system of higher education, which, from their perspective, contribute to decreases in quality and efficiency. The complaints revolve around the following key topics:

- a) Study programmes
- b) Relationship of teachers and students towards the process of studying
- c) Organisation of work and commitments at the faculty.

Many respondents reveal their personal convictions that new study programmes (i.e. Bologna-type programmes) are rather reduced, and made easier. Yet, at the same time, they also state that the new programmes may not be very well developed. As an illustration:

"I know of people who ... took an elective course and had to learn further about something they actually encountered for the first time only in the following semester" (M-III-MA-DS-4)

"They shorten the programmes but take out some important nuts and bolts, assuming that one knows these things, and that is not fair. It really depends on the subjects. Some subjects were just... slashed. The courses are incompatible with each other. It is not as if we were doing the same thing in several subjects, but that some things are considered to be known. It is all a mess. There is no communication between different departments." (M-II-MA-DS-2)

As a positive consequence of the reform of study programmes, respondents did identify the increased efficiency in studying, but, at the same time, express concerns related to quality and knowledge with which they will graduate.

*"Interviewer: Do you think that the new system of studying is more efficient than the previous one?
Respondent: ... I think... I think [name of faculty] it is... the system is more efficient but the question is what kind of knowledge is acquired. Whether, when you graduate, you have sufficient knowledge to compete with those who have graduates from old programmes" (M-III-MA-DS-4)*

Important pieces of the puzzle are factors related to human resources, i.e. actors in the teaching-learning process, teaching staff and students and their relationship to their own rights and duties. It seems that the misunderstanding between these two groups of actors originates from rules and regulations related to higher education reform which are not sufficiently clear. In

this way, unclear formulation and incomplete implementation of particular aspects of reforms in higher education, results partly with confusion...

*"Students are the problem... I can see some colleagues who have lost their pace. It seems that they did not figure out from the beginning that the new system of studying is something very serious. The key to successful studying is in continuous learning and amount of work invested."
(Z-I-MA-IJ-3, emphasis reflects interview)*

"Students are the biggest problem... e.g. many people are fed up with waking up early in the morning during high school. When we come to university, we think of it as "hooray, freedom"... and then you come here and someone forces you to attend the lectures every day, because this is part of Bologna. Each day you have to sign the attendance list... and the question then is – what has changed? I think students have to think for themselves what is easier, to accept this or... There is a portion of students who have not taken their studies seriously." (M-III-MA-DS-4)

... and partly with frustration:

"Each professor interprets this Bologna convention in his own way. I really do not understand at all how they were left with so much freedom" (M-II-FF-PL-3)

"... teachers to be adapting to the reforms, some better and some does not adapt at all. I had some experiences with teachers who have remarkably adapted to the new demands and it was really a pleasure to work with them." (M-III-MA-DS-4)

"I think there should be courses for teachers... that everyone should pass... we have a lot of professors who could not adapt to the new system. Students are not the only problem. Teachers could not adapt to the requirement to shorten the courses from 2000 pages to 300 or 900... and that is a big deal." (M-IV-FF-MM-3)

Therefore, the entire reform process is, to a lot of respondents, rather puzzling.

“... I have a small problem with Bologna, Bologna as it is being implemented and that is... what I can hear from others... What is said that is Bologna and what is done as Bologna is sort of... different” (Z-IV-FF-MM-1)

Apart from such systemic criticism, some respondents have an entire set of complaints related to organisation of work and tasks in higher education:

“... and those lectures and a lot of tasks, essays, colloquiums, tests one after the other. These tests are all piled up together... within a week or two. And now I have 4-5 tests in two weeks to pass and that is a lot of material. I would rather prefer to have one test or even one whole exam each month. It would have been better if we could dedicate more time to one piece of literature, one subject, and learn it adequately... in this way, we loose a lot...I also think that pre-exam tests and exams are scheduled to close to each other.” (M-II-FF-PL-3)

which may lead to dissatisfaction that such arrangement *“...leaves little time for extracurricular activities” (Z-IV-FF-MM-1).*

Due to all these reasons, some respondents believe that *“lectures should not be obligatory” (M-II-FF-PL-3)*, since the new organisation of lectures *“... requires... continuous studying, and ... most students are used to cramming just before exams, in those two-to three weeks, they sit down, cram, take the exam and pass it” (M-II-FF-PL-3).* For these reasons, they are not able to adapt to the new system of continuous work throughout the semester.

“... this new system is so inflexible, that I really have no idea who would be able to keep the state funded status, work, attend lectures and pass the required amount of exams necessary to remain a state funded student.” (Z-II-FF-PL-1)

It seems that in some cases reforms have been rather superficial, that the changes made were more in terms of form than in terms of substance, e.g. changing courses that lasted two semesters into one semester courses without adequate “cleaning” up of content.

“A significant number of subjects are still taught on the basis of old programmes. Two-semester courses have been squeezed into one semester. For example, [name of subject] is on the first year, in 45 minutes we go through 5-6 lessons. In the old programme, there was more time allocated to the same amount of information. From all the students who are regularly attending classes, a half, maybe even more, have difficulties coping with materials that are covered at such a pace. However, no one is brave enough to tell the professor how we feel and what we think.

Interviewer: Why do you think, no one is brave?

Respondent: It is not that I think, I know, since we talked about that a lot. It is the fear that the professor may hold a grudge...” (M-II-MA-IJ-4)

The problem may lie in the fact that, parallel to reforms of and within study programmes, no institutional mechanisms were put in place that would help map potential problems and offer some solutions. Until such time, it seems that the only response would be:

“In order that more students can pass into the next year of study, it is necessary to decrease the workload and allow even conditional enrolment^{vi} into the next year” (Z-I-MA-IJ-3)

In their analysis of the current system of higher education in Serbia, the **teachers** who were interviewed go one step further. Their narratives reveal, as the main problem, *decrease in quality* of higher education, which is manifested in several ways:

- a) continuous decrease in "quality" of newly enrolled students,
- b) progressive decrease in criteria for student assessment, hence leading to
- c) problems in assessment.

All interviewed teachers, without exception, state significant dissatisfaction with prior knowledge of current students:

"They are semiliterate, disinterested, convinced they know everything... they have rather high opinion about their own knowledge... knowledge that rarely goes beyond primary school. I think I can notice that they have rather low level of general knowledge, in terms of music, movies, culture in general. When ever I try to make a parallel with something contemporary, they do not react, they do not understand... My overall impression is that they are not at all conscious how much they do not know, how much their studying is easier, how little material they need to go through... and yet they are rather rude" (M-DOC-FF-BU-JB-4), docent^{vii}

"I can not really identify the cause, but students are not interested and lazier than before... On the one hand, they come with less prior knowledge. They do not know grammar sufficiently. Knowledge of math is lower than in previous generations. They expect to be asked only what you said in lectures, and studying is about something else, about learning deeper about certain issues. I know that most of the teachers are not satisfied". (M-VP-MA-BU- IJ-1), associate professor

Such state is reflected to the learning process as such, which starts resembling some continuation of secondary education, with minor elements of studying in final years:

“... they [students] ask me to dictate... When on exam, I have to ask only what I said in lectures. I repeat a lot... Around the fourth year of studies they start to show interest. Until then, they do not seem... connected. More like machines, on autopilot”. (M-DOC-FF-BU-JB-4), docent

Apart from decrease in quality, narratives of teacher respondents include problem of *lack of student interest* into anything that goes beyond fulfilment of basic course requirements:

“The quality has decreased a lot. This is the problem. Some criteria state that literature for the exam must not be more than 300 pages per course... therefore, it is rather difficult to get them to think about stuff, and it is very difficult to motivate them to read beyond obligatory readings. If they do not have to, they will not read it, and they will not read it because they do not have time. They have to spend 8 hours in study related activities and very often they spend 6-7 hours here [at the faculty]. So it is perfectly clear to me that, when they get home, they do not feel like reading more at all”. (Z-AS-FF-BU-PL-2), teaching assistant

Faced with lack of interest and lack of time, it seems that teachers' expectations are also decreasing. A number of teacher respondents testified of the feeling of personal defeat:

“... we have decreased criteria very much. For each generation we are forced to additionally decrease criteria, otherwise we would have to fail half of them... I can recognise this in myself. It is terribly that I am sometimes completely thrilled with the fact that they have understood something rather basic.”(M-DOC-FF-BU-JB-4), docent

Yet, it seems that what concerns the respondents the most is their feeling that this decrease of quality is their own fault:

“If we talk about efficiency, than we can say there has been an improvement. Rate of passing exams is high, but the question is what are the trade-offs, how do these students pass and how much have overall criteria decreased...” (Z-AS-FF-BU-PL-2), teaching assistant.

“Efficiency can be high if you lower your standards. The key is to couple efficiency and quality”.
(M-VP-MA-BU-IJ-1), associate professor

Closely related to the above issue is the system of assessment in which many of our respondents see the material manifestation and some form of institutionalisation of continuous trend of quality decrease:

“... we had to lower the standards. We have no right to ask students what we did not cover in class. This is not condensed to 20 hours of digested material that you are allowed to ask in exam. We have limited them, with this Bologna, in thinking. We have bounded their creativity, their thinking, them connecting things, possibilities to use their own head. It is terribly how we do not teach them to think any longer, but to collect some points. They know what they must do, what they do not have to do, they can calculate what is the minimum to pass... so everything boils down to teaching them to be opportune, and not to teach them to think”(Z-DOC-MA-BU-JB-2), docent

It seems that the problem may be in the following:

“The system... was introduced too fast. Neither young nor old have understood what is supposed to happen with this new system. Colleagues from [university in another country in the region], that we have good cooperation with, told us they made same mistakes, that it took them five years to organise teaching in a different way. They understood where the problems were after a while. The other problem is for students to understand what they have the right to demand. Currently, it is

this fantastic symbiosis: we do not demand a lot from them, they do not demand anything from us. But where does that lead?" (M-VP-MA-BU-IJ-1), associate professor

Social

Generally speaking, almost all respondents in their narratives, students and teachers alike, one way or the other contextualise the current situation to be part of the overall social climate, in terms of the overall social crisis being spilled over into the university reality and their lives:

"When the situation in the country improves, there will be more demand for knowledge, so the situation in the faculties will improve. If there is crisis, then this is not likely to happen." (Z-AP-MA-DS-3)

Many identify how some discrepancies in how universities or society function seem to re-iterate from year to year, leading to additional social problems:

"It seems to me that there is huge discrepancy between how education functions and how it is supposed to function... it functions the same way as our state ... large number of students is expected to enrol, and they enrol, and then what? There is not work for them! Does their degree represent some status symbol that is good for nothing...? I simply believe that our system of higher education does not function as it should, from the perspective of the future, our education is completely misguided..." (M-IV-FF-MM-3)

CONCLUSIONS

As our analysis shows, some of the factors affecting efficiency of studying in the new, Bologna reformed, higher education system, are similar to factors affecting efficiency in the pre-Bologna system. However, there are new issues that rise from implementation or inadequate operationalisation of the proposed reform solutions. The *coefficient of inefficiency* shows that students who have repeated one year of study, tend to repeat more, even in the new, Bologna system. Similarly, both pre-Bologna and Bologna students who perceive their workload to be more manageable tend to have lower coefficients of inefficiency.

Some changes in the higher education environment are revealed through the *coefficient of alienation*, which shows significant shifts in the perception of the relationship between key actors involved in teaching-learning process, taking into account its institutional setting (structural and symbolic) constructed within the boundaries of the specific social and historical context, as well as regulations and customs (Clark, 1997:92). Every change, however small, of one of the aforementioned elements (social context, customs, and regulations) produces changes of various diffuse meanings which make part of the symbolic order (Bourdieu) of relationships between structural elements, as well as social actors. The results show that students perceive to have a much better contact with teaching than administrative staff. This findings point to the shift in terms of basic conflict relationships: from the conflict related to the teaching situation, between those who “own” and transfer knowledge (teachers) and those who receive knowledge (students)^{viii}, the shift is towards the conflict between students (consumers of higher education) and faculty administration, responsible for organisation. Essentially, the focus is transferred from institutional (higher education) and personal idea of knowledge transfer to organisational problems of development and implementation of teaching process. This shift of focus from

essence to form is testimony to the restructuring of power relationships within the social field of higher education and emergence of new social actors in this field. They, within the new social and educational context are becoming an increasingly stronger force, which affects various aspects and the final destination and shape of teaching and research process (Jarić, 2008). Thus, the administrative staff and the “new managerial class” (Enders, 2001:266), being the new actors in higher education (besides state, teachers and students) become more important and powerful, and, in many cases, steer reform processes. Therefore, it is no wonder that other social actors, students and teachers, perceive them as antagonising and responsible for many problems related to organisation and content of studying.

Searching for different factors which, according to our respondents (teachers and students), affect efficiency of studying, we have mapped a number of problems, tendencies and processes. Starting from the classification of factors offered earlier (individual, family, institutional, social); we can now offer another classification, with respect to higher education system:

1. external factors, such as individual, family or social, and
2. internal factors, previously labelled as institutional.

This classification allows us to identify more clearly the factors that can be in the focus of further analysis of education system as a whole or particular institution in particular. External factors are, to a significant extent, beyond the reach of the education system (apart from some forms of affirmative action, or reforms of the student welfare system). Internal factors are, on the other hand, to a large extent under the control of the higher education system as such. In that sense, perceptions about poor functioning of certain elements in the system or about problems related to organisation of studying, should be understood as attempts to render these issues visible to those outside of the higher education community. Findings of this study may offer some guidelines into the effects of current reforms on the teaching process and its efficiency, and

where these reforms may be more an obstacle than an incentive for improvement of higher education.

It is certain however that students and teachers are remarkably in accordance with each other when it comes to evaluating the current higher education system. Their individual dissatisfaction, although still not articulated, is a potential threat to stability and efficiency of the newly reformed system. The current state of “fantastic symbiosis”, as one of our respondents named it, between teachers and students, is the state in which they symbolically unite against a common enemy - those steering the reforms – state, university and faculty administration and the new managerial class. This state questions the very basis of higher education. Unless this higher education can find the way to develop functional institutional mechanisms which will enable different social actors to articulate their opinions and regain the sense of belonging to the academic community, efficiency of higher education in the near future is likely to decrease and the decrease of quality will continue. The question remains whether the new symbolic order of structural relationships of power between past and current social actors (Jarić, 2008) will become the new higher education reality, or this restructuring will take some unexpected turns. Until then, it is not certain whether the new system will be able to answer the underlying dilemma: How to increase efficiency without decreasing quality?

NOTES

ⁱ After completion of all lectures (i.e. attending the lectures etc.), a student is granted 6 months to a year to pass all the exams. During this period, the student maintains all the welfare benefits and, in the case s/he graduates within this time s/he is generally not considered to be an unsuccessful student. Upon expiry of this period, the student has to register each year a prolongation of this status, but loses all the welfare benefits.

ⁱⁱ All quotations from interviews translated by one of the authors (Vukasovic). Codes next to quotations refer to codes of interviewees.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the pre-Bologna type of study programmes, students could finish their lectures and have additional 6 months or a year to pass all exams and write the final paper. This was considered an integral part of studying, and students kept all benefits stemming from being a student during those 6 months or a year.

^{iv} This status refers to the situation in which a student has completed all of his/her pre-exam duties (usually attending lectures, seminars etc) but still has to pass exam. An *apsolvent* period of 6 to 12 months is considered to be an integral part of the duration of the study programme, and during this time students do not lose any of their student welfare benefits.

^v The current Law on higher education, adopted in 2005, does not foresee the possibility of the so-called *part-time students*. The only distinction is made on the basis of who funds studies: state or student themselves.

^{vi} Conditional enrolment refers to the situation in which the students did not complete all of the requirements to enrol into the next year of study, but s/he is nevertheless allowed to attend the lectures in courses from the next year, pending fulfilment of all requirements by the end of first semester.

^{vii} The academic status of *docent* is awarded to holders of PhD, upon completion of additional requirements related to scientific work and experience in teaching. The status is in between teaching assistants and associate professors. Staff in such status can act as key lecturers for particular subjects, i.e. they would have teaching assistants of their own.

^{viii} The basic function of the traditional university since medieval times has been to teach students and transmit knowledge. (Clark, 1997:11)

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Table 1 - Sample for quantitative part of the research

Institution	% of total number of students	student questionnaires		teacher questionnaires	
		Planned	Collected	Planned	Collected
U of Belgrade	52.66%	400	391	45	43
U of Kragujevac	9.61%	100	151	10	19
U of Nis	13.17%	150	162	15	15
U of Novi Sad	23.35%	200	113	25	15

Table 2 - Distribution of questionnaires by university and field

Institution	Field					Total
	Law	Natural sciences	Social sciences	Medicine	Technical sciences	
Belgrade	83	73	93	52	90	391
Novi Sad	28	32	31	28	32	151
Nis	30	30	34	37	31	162
Kragujevac	20	25	21	23	24	113
Total	161	160	179	140	177	817

Table 3 – Expectations from higher education and their fulfilment, student questionnaire

	Solid basis for further education	Acquiring competences for employment	Contacts important for professional career	Contacts important for social reasons	Decreasing the possibility of unemployment
Expectations	56.8	82.2	58.8	61.4	73.6
Fulfilment	57.9	62.8	61.1	69.9	58.5