

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AS DETERMINANTS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract. *The main goal of the research was to examine the relationship between socio-demographic characteristics (gender, economic status, parents' education level) and student engagement. Character of engagement was shown through NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement Indicators, 2018) and encompasses academic challenge (higher-order learning, reflective and integrative learning, learning strategies, quantitative reasoning), learning with peers (collaborative learning, discussions with diverse others), experiences with faculty (student-faculty interaction, effective teaching practices), campus environment (quality of interactions, supportive environment). Since this research was based on the NSSE conceptual framework, information about student attitude towards the quality of studying and personal engagement was collected through the adapted questionnaire. The research sample consisted of 515 students are studying at the University of Niš. The results indicate that engagement was more pronounced among female students, students of poorer economic status, and students whose parents had a lower level of education.*

Key words: *higher education, faculty, student characteristics, student engagement, NSSE indicators.*

1. INTRODUCTION

External incentives and different types of support can be strong and effective motivators for students. A kind of creative, productive engagement occurs when students understand and accept that learning is a personal endeavor. When students get involved, start their engagement in various educational activities, they come to the first piece of knowledge and experience that the tasks in which they are participating are "worthwhile" because they help them achieve the personal and professional goals, they have set for themselves. The level and extent of their engagement depends on "input characteristics" (Astin 1999). These characteristics which students "bring" with them represent their capacity, strength for

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learning and personal development in the studies they attend. They include all the characteristics of students, educational experiences, but also the locality.

One of the basic distinctions between students is gender. Research indicates that the relationship between gender and engagement quality can be mediated by variables such as the prevailing gender population structure. Namely, after the Second World War, and especially during the 1980's, there was a rapid increase in the number of women participating in higher education around the world (Lavrič and Cupar 2015). Today, in most countries, women predominate when it comes to enrolling in, studying and successfully completing higher education (Goldin et al. 2006). The situation is similar in Serbia, where women lead in the number of enrolled and graduated students (Gavrilović 2022). However, despite the tendency for women to be educated, the differences between the genders show the more privileged position of men. Namely, while women outnumber men at the levels of undergraduate and master's academic studies, men are more represented when it comes to the highest academic level and there are significantly more male among PhD students. Modern times have influenced a change in the attitude towards women's education in terms of acquiring the highest possible level of qualifications, and it can be seen that this need is inconsistent with their traditional role. Women acquire a certain level of higher education, which gives them opportunities for better jobs and a material contribution to the quality of family life. Therefore, they rarely decide on a degree that could delay and reduce their reproductive period and the chance to take on the role of a mother.

In some empirical studies it was determined that there are no gender differences in the scope of engagement (Zhao et al. 2005). In some others, statistically significant relationships indicate that gender as a variable has different effects on certain aspects of engagement (Tison et al. 2011). Kuh (2003) showed that female students have higher scores than male students in terms of commitment to tasks, reading and writing, that they are more inclined to communicate with faculty members, while Pascarella et al. (1997) determined that they perceive the environment of a higher education institution as less stimulating. On the other hand, men are more engaged in extracurricular and project activities. Also, they are more involved in student organizations, where they often take leadership roles, as well as in sports activities and competitions (Edenfeld 2018). Female students are more dedicated to activities that at a certain point contribute to their achievements. However, they have a hard time deciding to express their successes in a wider social aspect. Unlike them, male students are more open to different forms of cooperation and their achievements are more visible and public (Ćirić 2022).

Family conditions are among the most fundamental indicators of differences in the reproduction of educational achievement. Marković Krstić and Milošević Radulović (2015) conducted research in different national contexts according to which a higher cultural and education status of the parents contributes to educational success and that its influence is more intense than economic and professional status. Cultural capital in families with higher education, a more favorable economic status, with relatively high ambitions and useful social capital, enables and greatly facilitates the persistence of students on their academic path.

Regarding the influence of the parents' cultural and education status on student engagement, Kuh et al. (2006) point to two important aspects. The first refers to the concept of the *first generation of students* and represents the achieved level of higher education of the father and mother. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) show the importance of this factor, citing the fact that students whose parents graduated from university have a five times greater chance of obtaining a diploma themselves. Some authors (Baucal 2012; Rogošić 2018) indicate that the possibility of access to higher education and its successful

completion is much more uncertain for female students, with lower achievements, greater chronological age, and who are from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

According to the results of the *Eurostudent* research for the Republic of Serbia, in cooperation with the Tempus and Erasmus Foundation, realized in 2015, a young person whose parents only have a primary education has an eighty times lower chance of graduating from university than a person whose parents have a higher education. Also, a person whose parents have completed high school has about three and a half times less chance of obtaining a university degree. Family circumstances and what is taken for granted as usual also define the education status to some extent. Unlike families where the older members have completed some form of higher education, it is assumed that this level is expected from the younger ones as well.

With the expansion of higher education, the number of members of the lower education strata who are enrolled in higher education institutions grows proportionately, some inequalities move towards postgraduate studies, while some become horizontal, making certain professions more desirable and prestigious than others (Lavrič and Cupar 2015). Changes in the market and the need for new occupations have resulted in the innovation of study programs at institutions that are directed towards informatics and various forms of marketing and working with people. In addition to new ones, growth was also recorded in traditional occupations. Thus, medical studies, primarily due to deficits and job opportunities, have regained importance and interest among freshmen.

Another important characteristic related to the human capital of students are the expectations and support of the family. Family influence on an individual's career choice is significant, which is confirmed by the results of research conducted over the last twenty years. Parental dynamics and interaction with children (attachment, parental behavior) plays an important role in the career development of children already at primary school age (Hamrick and Stage 2004). In addition to family support, the socioeconomic status of students is also significant.

There are assumptions that in order to complete studies and obtain a higher education degree, it is not enough to only have abilities and predispositions, but also financial resources. Sources of funding during studies represent a combination of social and individual investment in education. The economic status of the family has a significant share in the possibilities for obtaining a degree in higher education. Students generally do not have their own sources of income and their financial status directly depends on their family status. Marković Krstić (2014) points to the fact that the advantage of students who come from families with a higher economic status is not only reflected in the material prerequisites for continuing education but also in the possibility of choosing studies in accordance with personal wishes, interests and aspirations. In contrast to them, those who come from low-income families align their wishes regarding studies with the financial status of the family, the physical availability of the institution and the costs of studying. Therefore, Kuh et al. (2006) emphasize that financial resources greatly facilitate the action of factors such as family support and expectations, as well as the adequate preparation and educational aspirations of future students.

2. THE METHOD

The main goal of the research was to examine the relationship between socio-demographic characteristics (gender, economic status, parents' education level), and student

engagement. The nature of the engagement was shown through the National Survey of Student Engagement 2020 indicators: academic challenge (higher-order learning, reflective and integrative learning, learning strategies, quantitative reasoning), learning with peers (collaborative learning, discussions with diverse others), experiences with faculty members (student-faculty interaction, effective teaching practices), the campus environment (quality of interactions, supportive environment). It was assumed that engagement will be more pronounced among female students, with a more favorable economic status and a better cultural and education status of their parents.

2.1. The sample

The sample consisted of 515 students studying at one of the six faculties of the University of Niš. Respondents of both genders, with different socio-demographic and educational background and orientations participated in the research. For the purposes of the paper, the structure of the sample is presented according to: higher education institution (Table 1), student gender (Table 2), parents' education level (Table 3), economic status (Table 4).

Table 1 Structure of the sample of students according to the higher education institution

Higher education institution	Students	
	N	%
Faculty of Sport and Physical Education	92	17.9%
Faculty of Sciences and Mathematics	87	16.9%
Faculty of Philosophy	115	22.4%
Faculty of Medicine	56	10.9%
Faculty of Electronics	63	12.3%
Faculty of Occupational Safety	101	19.6%
Total	514	100.0%

The sample shows that the largest number of the respondents are from the Faculty of Philosophy and the smallest are from the Faculty of Electronics and Medicine (Table 1).

Table 2 Structure of the student sample by gender

Gender	Students	
	N	%
Male	164	31.8%
Female	351	68.2%
Total	515	100.0%

The structure of the student sample by gender shown in Table 2 is not uniform, and the sample consists of two thirds of female students and one third of male students, which approximately corresponds to the gender representation in the total student population.

Regarding the parents' cultural and education level, the data in Table 3 show that the highest percentage of respondents come from families where the parents have completed high school, while the lowest percentage includes respondents whose parents earned a PhD and who remain at the elementary school level. In second place in terms of the parents' education level we find respondents whose parents attended high school or higher education institutions. The data support the fact that the respondents included in the sample

in the highest percentage tend to surpass their parents in terms of education level. The data indicate a heterogeneous structure of the sample in this domain of student characteristics.

Table 3 The structure of the sample of students according to the parents' educational background

Parents' education level	Father		Mother	
	N	%	N	%
Elementary School	16	3.1%	22	4.3%
High School	329	64.1%	316	61.4%
College or University	132	25.7%	143	27.8%
Master's degree	27	5.3%	29	5.6%
PhD	9	1.8%	5	1.0%
Total	513	100.0%	515	100.0%

Table 4 The structure of the sample of students according to economic status

Income level	Students	
	N	%
Low (Basic needs only)	109	21.2%
High (Enough not to worry about financial stability)	375	73.1%
Very high (We live better than most)	29	5.7%
Total	513	100.0%

The categories of the sample related to the economic aspect were examined (Table 4). Regarding the economic status of the family, a corresponding description was added to each of the mentioned categories in order to obtain more reliable data. Students assessed their economic status as low (those who can afford only the most basic needs), high (those who have enough so they not have to worry about financial stability) or very high (those who live better than most). The respondents mostly assessed their economic status as high or low. A very small number stated that they belonged to the wealthy category. According to these data, it can be concluded that higher education represents a certain perspective for a better quality of life for students.

2.2. Instrument

The adapted NSSE questionnaire for students (National Survey of Student Engagement 2020) assesses student attitudes towards the quality of studying and personal engagement in a way that assesses participation in activities, attitudes towards the practice of encouraging engagement and attitude towards opportunities for engagement and personal development. It is expected from students to rate their level of agreement with the statements made in the questionnaire (41 items in total, the original version of the 2020 NSSE questionnaire) with a different range of assessment scale. The most common scale is a four-point assessment scale (never-very often; very little-very much). The questionnaire is under the authorship of the *NSSE Research Center* and the *Institute for Effective Teaching Practices* in Bloomington, Indiana, USA. Due to the copyright law the author was given the consent for use, translation and adaptation as well as public, non-commercial display.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Basic sociodemographic characteristics of students showed the differences in the perceptions of the students about their engagement according to gender (Table 5). To examine this influence, the Mann-Whitney U test was applied.

Table 5 Gender significant differences in student perceptions of quality of engagement

NSSE indicators of student engagement	Gender	N	AM	SD	p
Higher-Order Learning	male	164	2.60	0.65	0.097
	female	350	2.71	0.69	
Reflective and Integrative Learning	male	164	2.69	0.59	0.000
	female	351	2.91	0.64	
Learning Strategies	male	163	2.86	1.09	0.000
	female	352	3.12	0.70	
Quantitative Reasoning	male	163	2.22	0.68	0.453
	female	350	2.24	1.12	
Collaborative Learning	male	164	2.72	0.56	0.001
	female	351	2.89	0.56	
Discussions with Diverse Others	male	162	2.66	0.82	0.000
	female	351	2.96	0.86	
Student-Faculty Interactions	male	164	2.12	0.76	0.094
	female	351	2.25	0.77	
Effective Teaching Practices	male	164	2.74	0.63	0.307
	female	351	2.79	0.69	
Quality of Interactions	male	164	4.90	1.91	0.313
	female	351	4.94	1.37	
Supportive Environment	male	162	2.38	0.60	0.432
	female	351	2.41	0.65	

* statistically significant on level $p < 0.05$, ** statistically significant on level $p < 0.01$

Disproportionately more female than male respondents participated in the research. This is a reflection of the actual situation regarding the gender structure of the students at the University of Niš. Based on the obtained data, there are statistically significant differences between male and female students in relation to certain indicators of student engagement. The data indicate that there is a difference in the expressiveness of certain indicators of engagement, such as reflective and integrative learning, learning strategies, collaborative learning and discussion with diverse others in female respondents compared to male respondents. Therefore, it can be concluded that the female respondents are more inclined to think. Also, they showed a more pronounced communicativeness and expression of values related to the acceptance of diversity.

The existence of teaching subjects that deal with this issue from different aspects and with a multidisciplinary approach makes a big contribution, which is especially pronounced in the field of social sciences and humanities. The data are in accordance with the results of research indicating that female students are more dedicated to tasks and studies (Hu and Kuh 2002). Emancipation of women and reaching the maximum of educational capacities speaks in favor not only of educational advancement, but also of representation that they engage more in activities.

Unequal access to higher education, considering the ability of the individual and his family to financially bear the burden of education at the higher level, primarily affects young

people from families with low and middle economic status. According to the data of *the Study on the Social Dimension of Education in the RS* (2012), it was pointed out that if a person lives in a household of low financial status his chances of not being a student are practically infinitely higher than the chances of studying. Already with a higher medium financial position, the odds ratio changes and a person living in a household with such a status has a 1.7 times greater chance of studying than not studying, while in a household of high financial status, his chances of studying are 2.2 times higher rather than not studying.

Based on data from earlier research (Astin 1993; Marković Krstić 2014; Šćukanec et al. 2016), whose focus was on the effects of the family's economic status, it was assumed that engagement would be more pronounced in students of better socioeconomic status. The differences between the average scores of students who assessed their family's economic status as low, high and very high were examined. The results obtained using the Mann-Whitney U test are shown in Table 6.

Table 6 Significant differences in family economic status and student engagement

NSSE indicators of student engagement	Parents' economic status	N	AM	SD	p
Higher-Order Learning	low	109	2.58	0.78	0.224
	high	374	2.71	0.65	
	very high	29	2.57	0.66	
Reflective and Integrative Learning	low	109	2.86	0.63	0.937
	high	375	2.83	0.64	
	very high	29	2.81	0.51	
Learning Strategies	low	109	3.14	0.70	0.012
	high	375	3.03	0.90	
	very high	29	2.72	0.67	
Quantitative Reasoning	low	109	2.17	0.76	0.468
	high	373	2.26	1.08	
	very high	29	2.08	0.87	
Collaborative Learning	low	109	2.93	0.52	0.079
	high	375	2.82	0.58	
	very high	29	2.68	0.50	
Discussions with Diverse Others	low	108	2.84	0.83	0.799
	high	374	2.88	0.86	
	very high	29	2.79	0.94	
Student-Faculty Interactions	low	109	2.28	0.79	0.463
	high	375	2.17	0.75	
	very high	29	2.27	0.90	
Effective Teaching Practices	low	109	2.75	0.73	0.922
	high	375	2.78	0.66	
	very high	29	2.77	0.65	
Quality of Interactions	low	109	5.04	2.03	0.970
	high	375	4.91	1.39	
	very high	29	4.88	1.60	
Supportive Environment	low	108	2.32	0.59	0.011
	high	375	2.45	0.64	
	very high	28	2.13	0.63	

* statistically significant on level $p < 0.05$, ** statistically significant on level $p < 0.01$

The data obtained from the research indicate a significant share of students who assess their financial status as low, or rather have only the most basic needs. It is assumed that

having their tuition paid by the state greatly contributes to these students attending some of the study programs at the institutions of their choice. The majority of students still belong to the group of those who have enough so they should not worry about financial stability, while there is a drastically small number of those who consider that they live better than average. Given that the respondents here are students who attend institutions founded by the Republic of Serbia, the assumption is that students of very high financial status mostly enroll in one of the privately-owned higher education institutions.

Differences were noted between students of different economic status in relation to learning strategy indicators and supportive organizational culture. In terms of learning strategies, the average values decrease with an increase in economic status, and students with low financial status have the most pronounced strategies.

Supportive organizational culture is perceived by students of high financial status (2.45), followed by low (2.32), while students who stated a very high economic status report the lowest scores related to organizational support (2.13). Students from the category of high economic status showed the lowest average values most indicators of engagement. It can be assumed that students who have the opportunity to finance their studies, independently or from the public resources, are not burdened with achieving success and regularly fulfilling their obligations. A higher education diploma is probably not a priority for these students, given that they are not inclined to participate in various aspects of curricular and extracurricular activities. Also, in the context of students whose parents have completed a higher education, expectations from children in this regard are often high, and directions are often imposed by parents. Therefore, without the necessary internal motivation, but also financial pressure, students of very high financial status adapt their studies to the desired pace of progress.

The low education status of the parents represents a significant obstacle on the way to higher education. A family environment in which the acquisition of higher education is not valued, in which ambitions related to educational achievement are not nurtured or it is considered unattainable, significantly reduce the aspirations and motivation of young people to enroll and complete tertiary education.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) stated that the parents' education level is one of the crucial factors for the success and completion of the study process. This is supported by the data of the *Eurostudent V* (Jovanović et al. 2016), survey for the Republic of Serbia. It was important to examine the connection between student perceptions of student engagement indicators and the parents' education level. Connections between these variables were checked by Spearman's correlation coefficient. The results are shown in Table 7.

Based on the obtained results, it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant weak negative correlation between certain indicators of student engagement and the parents' education level. Supportive organizational culture significantly correlates with the father's education status ($r=-.126$), while reflective and integrative learning ($r=-.089$), quantitative reasoning ($r=-.091$), and effective teaching practices ($r=-.143$) correlate with the mother's education status. Negative correlations in the research results indicate that student engagement is more pronounced among students whose parents' have a lower education level. According to the results, there is a desire of students to secure a better job and future through education as a financial, as well as social means. These data show that the perception of education has changed in a positive way.

Table 7 Significant correlations between student engagement and parents' education level

NSSE indicators of student engagement	p	Father's education status	Mother's education status
Higher-Order Learning	Spearman's rho	-.082	-.081
	p	.063	.068
Reflective and Integrative Learning	Spearman's rho	-.036	-.089*
	p	.411	.044
Learning Strategies	Spearman's rho	.014	.008
	p	.746	.851
Quantitative Reasoning	Spearman's rho	-.054	-.091*
	p	.224	.040
Collaborative Learning	Spearman's rho	.005	-.029
	p	.906	.505
Discussions with Diverse Others	Spearman's rho	-.022	-.012
	p	.623	.786
Student-Faculty Interactions	Spearman's rho	-.073	-.065
	p	.100	.143
Effective Teaching Practices	Spearman's rho	-.072	-.143**
	p	.104	.001
Quality of Interactions	Spearman's rho	-.054	-.069
	p	.222	.116
Supportive Environment	Spearman's rho	-.126**	-.083
	p	.004	.059

* statistically significant on level $p < 0.05$, ** statistically significant on level $p < 0.01$

The awareness of parents that education and studying enable a better social and economic position, greater chance for employment and choice speaks of raising awareness of the importance of education and the benefits it brings. The inputs that come from the family are a valuable resource that influences the future directions of children, and the data show that the students from the examined sample and family have a developed awareness of the value of education. The family's efforts to provide their children with the best possible living conditions are reflected in the observation of education as a long-term investment in the well-being of children. The values inculcated in this way result in greater engagement of students and the desire to respond to the challenges of their future calling as prepared and competent as possible.

4. CONCLUSION

The engagement of students on the territory of the Republic of Serbia is one of the newer concepts introduced into the system of higher education as an important element of the modern paradigm, student-oriented education. Considering the current nature and complexity that characterize the phenomenon of student engagement, as well as its role in ensuring the quality of studies and expected outcomes (development of research, interpersonal, intercultural abilities, creative and creative thinking, etc.), the starting point for this research was to examine the relation between socio-demographic characteristics (gender, economic status, parents' education level) and student engagement. The basic assumption of this study was that engagement will be more pronounced among female students, with a more favorable economic status and a better cultural and education level of their parents. The

examination of the basic hypothesis has shown some but none of the expected results. Namely, the results indicate that engagement was more pronounced among female students, students of poorer economic status, and students whose parents had a lower level of education. The main findings have shown that female students have more pronounced communicativeness and expression of values related to the engagement in various ways. Also, students from the category of high economic status showed the lowest average values for most indicators of engagement. These students are not burdened with achieving success and a higher education diploma is probably not a priority for these students. When it comes to the cultural and education capital of students, it can be assumed that in the context of the University of Niš, and according to the results of the research, there is a desire of students to "overtake" their parents in this respect, to secure a better job and perspective through education as financial, as well as social.

Based on the results, some implications important for pedagogical practice were pointed out. Students differ according to their personal characteristics and affinities, as well as according to the experience they bring with them when enrolling in their higher institution of choice. In this respect, it is necessary to respect these differences and facilitate the transition from the secondary to the tertiary level of education, especially during the first year of study when the rate of student retention and dropout is the highest. In this regard, it is important to promote the importance of engagement in higher education, to inform students about the possibilities of engagement as well as to raise collective awareness at the faculties about the importance of improving this area as well as an effective way of evaluation.

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SOCIO-DEMOGRAFSKE KARAKTERISTIKE KAO DETERMINANTE ANGAŽOVANJA STUDENATA

Ovo istraživanje za svoj osnovni cilj imalo je ispitanje relacija između pojedinih socio-demografskih karakteristika (pola, ekonomskog statusa porodice, školske spremne oca i majke) i angažovanja studenata. Karakter angažovanja operacionalizovan je putem NSSE indikatora (National Survey of Student Engagement indicators, 2018) i obuhvata akademski izazov (učenje mišljenjem višeg reda, refleksivno i integrativno učenje, strategije učenja), zajedničko učenje studenata (kolaborativno učenje i negovanje različitosti), iskustvo sa nastavnicima (interakcije nastavnika i studenata i efektivno podučavanje), institucionalno okruženje (kvalitet interakcija i podržavajuća organizaciona kultura). S obzirom na to da je istraživanje zasnovano na NSSE konceptualnom okviru, percepcije studenata o kvalitetu studiranja i ličnog angažovanja prikupljene su pomoću prilagođenog upitnika. Uzorak istraživanja činilo je 515 studenata Univerziteta u Nišu. Dobijeni podaci ukazuju na to da je angažovanje izraženije kod studenata ženskog pola, slabijeg ekonomskog statusa i nižeg nivoa obrazovanja roditelja.

Ključne reči: visoko obrazovanje, visokoškolski nastavnici, karakteristike studenata, angažovanje studenata, NSSE indikatori.