

## CHALLENGES TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN SERBIA – A CONTRIBUTION TO THE PUBLIC DEBATE ON HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM

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**Abstract:** *Higher education, as an area of great public interest, is the subject of a series of state actions, laws and allocation of financial resources. Reform/s in the field of higher education assume that we have identified problems in higher education and that we have criteria based on which we will evaluate reform solutions and opt for the one/s that best meet those criteria. The intention of this text is to contribute to the identification and understanding of some of the problems that public policies in the field of higher education should address and to offer criteria for evaluating the proposed solutions. As the basic problems of higher education (in Serbia) we have identified - the enlargement of the student population and the demand for quality control arising from the need to standardize every "serial" production, the need to expand the coverage of underrepresented social groups, the need for financial and other support for underrepresented social groups, which arise from the combination of enlargement and inclusiveness of higher education, the increase in the diversity of the student population in terms of abilities, aspirations, motivation and value orientations, and the need for innovations in teaching methods in higher education, which results from this.*

**Key words:** *public policies, reform, higher education, inclusive higher education, quality control of higher education, evaluation.*

### 1. INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATION

Reforms of education in general and higher education in particular in Serbia are a continuous process that is periodically updated in its various focuses and topics. Higher education, as an area of great public interest, is in this process the subject of various public policies - a series of state actions, regulatory measures, laws and allocation of financial resources. Creation and reforms of public policies imply at least two things: 1) identification

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and formulation of problems for which public policies are the solution and 2) analysis and evaluation of alternative solutions based on previously established criteria. Reform/s in the field of higher education assume that we have identified problems in higher education and that we have criteria based on which we will evaluate reform solutions and opt for the one/s that best meet those criteria. The intention of this text is to contribute to the identification and understanding of some of the problems that public policies in the field of higher education should address and to offer criteria for evaluating the proposed solutions.

That the debates about the problems of higher education in Serbia are constantly current is illustrated by a short excerpt from a recent interview with the rector of Belgrade University, for the newspaper *Politika*, in which he identifies the main problems of higher education in Serbia as he sees them. According to professor Vladan Đokić,

"Today, universities in the world are faced with the challenges posed by the market: to be financially self-sustaining and market-driven. This is particularly demanding for universities funded by the public sector, such as ours, and *the role they play in providing access to an ever-increasing number of students...* Such changed *circumstances imply a re-examination of the basic functions, roles and purpose of universities*, which we should be especially careful and dedicated to working within it and together with other holders of the educational process at all levels.... State universities in Serbia have been facing the problem of a *systemically disordered way of financing higher education for a long time, which is reflected in the inconsistencies and contradictions of numerous laws and regulations that regulate financing of higher education institutions. ...The inadequate position of teachers in society and the questionable quality of secondary education have led to a drastic decrease in interest in teacher study programs at colleges*. This problem can cause far-reaching consequences for our society... (italic G.Đ.)" (Jokić-Stamenković, 2023)

One of the theses that we advocate in this paper is that the role of the modern university, as well as the way of its organization, financing and content of the educational process, has been changed and shaped as a *reaction to the massification of higher education*. So, the system of higher education in modern Serbia is (first of all) a system of institutions that provide access to an increasing number of students and within which higher education certificates are obtained en masse. Therefore, one of the main problems for which public policies in the field of higher education should find a *solution is the organization (and financing) of mass higher education*. Mass higher education in its turn calls for a solution of at least to more problems: the widening of access to education, i.e. proportional representation of all social groups in higher education; the requirement for quality control of the results of the educational process, which takes on the characteristics of "serial production".

## 2. HIGHER EDUCATION FOR AN INCREASING NUMBER OF STUDENTS

The massification of higher education is not accidental, but necessary in certain social circumstances, so it cannot be "disabled", "abolished" or simply neglected as a determining factor in the organization and content of modern higher education. We have described the social circumstances that necessarily led to the massification of higher education elsewhere (Popović & Đorić, 2011, p. 310). Here we will only remind you of some basic processes.

In the second half of the 20th century, the full status of a citizen meant not only the already won equality of citizens before the law, and the right to political participation

through universal suffrage, but also full access to all social resources. Mass access to education (at all levels), as one of the basic channels of social mobility, i.e. access to all social positions, is becoming the need of the hour. In the economic sphere - the number of jobs that require expertise that cannot be acquired through experience, but only through formal higher education, is increasing. These jobs are part of the division of labor into detailed operations through which it is possible to base technological processes in industry on scientific knowledge. The development of industry whose technology is based on scientific knowledge results in the *emergence of scientific and engineering professions*. An army of modern researchers is being put at the service of business and, with the strengthening of the military complex, military industry. Combining the results of the work of teams of highly specialized experts requires elaborate coordination and organization. This leads to an increase in the number of *managers and financial and legal professionals*. The complication of state affairs and the development of a bureaucratized management apparatus at the state and local level results in greater employment of *experts in the state administration*. Finally, general education, health care for broad sections of the population, and the growth of the welfare state in general, after World War II, led to the emergence of a series of "social professions" which, in turn, led to an increase in the number of *employed experts in medicine and education and administrators and providers of social protection services*.

Modern education, in the circumstances we have described, has a clear social function to, among other things, train broad layers of the population to efficiently and competently perform various jobs necessary for the functioning of society in various segments, in accordance with their area of expertise. Modern universities increasingly assume the function of professional training of such personnel.

There is no doubt that the massification of higher education has also occurred in Serbia and that the organization of the mass production of experts is a problem of higher education reform. Many changes that mean modernity and that require modern education have already taken place in Serbia (industrialization, urbanization, introduction of modern technologies, openness to the world and new technologies, etc.). These changes require a highly educated population and require a system capable of educating that population. With the branching of knowledge, the formation of new scientific disciplines, the creation of new professions, the system of higher education is increasingly multiplied and complicated, increasing the number of students at a high speed. This is one of the tendencies in which Serbia does not lag behind the European environment.

**Table 1** Percentage of undergraduate students in the Serbian population aged 20-24 years

	2007	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Serbia	29%	35%	36%	38%	37%	37%	36%	37%
EU average		34%	34%	34%	35%	35%	35%	36%

Source: Eurostat

However, one may question that the massification of higher education in Serbia completely coincides with the same social changes that in the European context led to a massive demand for highly educated experts and to a changed role of universities. The development and massification of higher education in Serbia also took place under the influence of less general factors. It started with the realization of the importance of education for the development of the country and the "planning of the educated elite" in the 19th century. In the socialist period, it was marked by a strong wave of egalitarianism

that enabled a large number of children of workers and peasants to get access to higher education at the beginning of the second half of the last century. During the period of growing unemployment in the second half of the last century and at the beginning of this century, higher education institutions often had the function of a kind of buffer zone that was supposed to cushion the pressure of the coming generations on the labor market. In the turbulent time immediately before and after the breakup of Yugoslavia, higher education seemed to guarantee neither employment nor social promotion. Finally, the massification of higher education in Serbia was accepted and promoted as one of the EU standards in the accession process. Although it is not the subject of this discussion, in the context of such specificity of the development of higher education in Serbia, it is legitimate to ask the question whether the degree of modernization of Serbian society is such that its functioning requires the same number of highly educated experts as is produced and as expected by the Education Development Strategy until 2020.

A few general indicators will help us at least guess the answer to that question.

**Table 2** Structure of employees in 2012 in percent

	Primary school and lower	Middle and higher school	Faculties
Serbia	21%	64%	15%
EU average	19%	49%	32%

*Source:* Eurostat

**Table 3** Percentage employment and unemployment rates by level of education, 2012

	Primary school and lower		Middle and higher school		Faculties	
	Serbia	EU	Serbia	EU	Serbia	EU
Employment	35%	44%	48%	68%	70%	82%
Unemployment	10%	19%	17%	10%	15%	6%

*Source:* Eurostat

The structure of employees in Serbia in 2012 was such that half as many employees as the EU average had university degrees. While in the European context unemployment rates in 2012 decreased with the increase in education level, and were lowest for persons with higher education, in Serbia the unemployment rate was higher among persons with secondary school and college than among persons with a low educational level. Do these data indicate a lack of demand for highly educated personnel?! If the changes that led to the massification of higher education in Serbia in the developed world have slowed down or stopped, and if at this stage of the development of Serbian society the demand for highly educated experts is less than their supply, do we then need mass higher education in its content aimed at the labor market?!

Ten years later, however, the educational structure of the employed population in Serbia, as well as the ratio of employed and unemployed with different levels of education, compared to the EU average, is significantly different.

**Table 4** Structure of employees in 2022 in percent

	Basic and lower	Medium and higher	Faculties
Serbia	12%	60%	29%
EU average	19%	43%	38%

*Source:* Eurostat

The share of highly educated people in the employed population, although still lower, has somewhat approached the EU average. Employment rates generally increased, and among the highly educated, the employment rate equaled the EU average. At the same time, in 2022, the unemployment rate among the highly educated workforce is, as in the EU, lower than the unemployment rate among the less educated population.

**Table 5** Percentage employment and unemployment rates by level of education, 2022

	Basic and lower		Medium and higher		Faculties	
	Serbia	EU	Serbia	EU	Serbia	EU
Employment	51%	58%	68%	74%	84%	85%
Unemployment	13%	12%	13%	9%	6%	4%

Source: Eurostat

And the importance of higher education for employment opportunities has grown significantly. For example, in 2016, barely more than half of young people (ages 20-29) with a university degree were employed. By 2022, the share of highly educated young people among employees has increased and equaled the EU average (75% vs. 77%).

**Table 6** Percentage employment rates of young people aged 20-29, with a university degree

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2022
Serbia	55%	59%	63%	65%	65%	75%
EU average	72%	73%	74%	75%	72%	77%

Source: Eurostat

We can conclude that there is a need for a highly educated workforce in Serbia, that higher education increases the chances of employment and reduces the risk of unemployment, and that the massification of higher education is an indigenous need of the labor market in Serbia, as well as in the EU.

However, it remains an open question *whether the mass of higher education simultaneously implies equal access to education for all, i.e. whether higher education functions as a channel of social promotion (social mobility) or through the selection of students (and the absence of organized support for studying of all social strata) reproduces inequalities in wider society.*

### 3. SOCIAL DIMENSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education in modern society becomes an ideal that everyone aspires to, but which is realistic for some and unattainable for many. In the classic elite model of higher education, it could be argued that children from the most educated, rich, affluent families, from families that emphasize the importance of higher education, with high aspirations and a strong motivation for learning, study. According to Weber, who describes the education or scientific process at a Humboldt-type university, training for scientific research work at German universities was limited only to the intellectual aristocracy (see Popović & Đorić, 2011, p. 309). Until the beginning of the 20th century, higher education was a privilege of the upper classes, so aristocrats and the sons of wealthier representatives of the third estate could go to university (whose motivation for acquiring a university education was driven

by the need to educate the spirit, to cultivate taste and build a style, not the need to acquire professional knowledge and preparation for performing some professional activity). The doors of the university were closed to women, regardless of social origin, lower classes and ethnic and racial minorities. During the 19th century, a very small number of students were recruited from that narrow base, whose number increased significantly only after the First World War (Popović & Đorić, 2011, p. 313).

In the last few dozen years, as part of the Bologna Process (started by the *Rectors' Conference of Europe* in 1999), the "social dimension" of higher education, according to which students can enroll and complete their studies without obstacles related to, among other things, their socioeconomic status. In a large number of transnational and national policies, declarations or development strategies adopted since 2000, the social dimension is unavoidable. Thus, for example, the new EU agenda for higher education from 2017 has, as one of its priorities, building inclusive higher education. "This means ensuring that higher education is inclusive, open to talent from all backgrounds, and that higher education institutions are not ivory towers, but civic-minded learning communities connected to their communities...The profile of the population of students entering and completing higher education should reflect wider society. This requires intervention from government, schools and higher education" (European Commission, 2017).

The members of the *European Universities' Association* (EUA) committed to the "European Universities Charter on Lifelong Learning" stating that: "European universities acknowledge the diversity of individual learner needs and therefore their responsibility to adapt programmes and ensure the development of appropriate learning outcomes in a learner-centered perspective. They also pledge to play their part in promoting widening participation and continuing education." (EUA, 2008, p. 5). Similarly, UNESCO's organization for higher education, the *International Association of Universities*, published the recommendation "Equitable Access, Success and Quality in Higher Education", which aims to expand access to higher education in countries with low rates of participation. For the countries that have already achieved a significant level of participation in higher education, it is recommended to "broaden access so as to include more individuals from under-represented groups, ... regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, economic or social class, age, language, religion, location or [dis]abilities" (IAU, p. 1).

In Serbia, according to Article 3 of the *Law on the Basics of the Education and Training System* (2009/2011/2013), the education and training system must provide for all children, pupils and adults (students): equal right and access to education and education without discrimination and segregation on the basis of gender, social, cultural, ethnic, religious or other affiliation, place of residence, i.e. residence, material or health condition, difficulties and hindrances in development and disability, as well as on other grounds (Zakon o osnovama sistema obrazovanja i vaspitanja RS, 2013).

Despite these declarations, today there are many young people in the world who, due to social inequality, are unable to start or continue their education and, precisely because of this, remain on the margins of social life (Laketa, 2010, p. 98). In the overview paper "Global Education Expansion and Socio-Economic Development", the authors Hannum and Buchmann refer to several studies that warn of the fact that the expansion of education in developed and developing countries does not reduce the relative advantages of students from more elite social strata over students from lower socioeconomic strata, students with special needs or other underrepresented groups of students (Hannum & Buchmann, 2005, pp. 333-354). Research in Britain has shown that with the acceptance of the neoliberal

model of social development, the opportunity for children from working-class and middle-class families to study at prestigious universities decreases. It is important to emphasize, based on the findings so far, that the student population is not a reflection of the structure of society, but rather a reflection of the structure of the higher layers of society, in any case layers with greater economic or cultural capital.

Until now, there has been no equal access to higher education in Serbia, considering that among the enrolled students there are fewer and fewer of those from poor families and vulnerable groups. Young people from the middle class and those who live in urban areas enroll in the faculty, while there are fewer and fewer students from rural areas. ...According to the words of Slobodan Cvejić, a professor from the University of Belgrade, the number of students in Serbia is growing year by year, but children from the countryside and from poor families participate less and less in the student population (Euroactiv, 2015). Data from 2007 suggest a lower inclusion in higher education of young people from the poorest families (14% compared to an average of 39%) and young people from the least educated families (19% compared to an average of 39%). (Ministarstvo prosvete, 2008, p. 48).

In the rest of the text, a comparative coverage of the higher education of students of different social backgrounds in Serbia (represented by occupation and education of parents) in 2010 and 2019 is given.

### 3.1. Parents' occupation

The share of students whose parents are businessmen, managers and officials (62%) is almost twice as high as the share of experts, managers and officials in the general population (33%), in 2010.

**Table 7** Percentage occupation in the entire population and among parents of students

	Employees in Serbia		Parents of students	
	2010	2019	2010	2019
Owners, officers and managers	5.4%	1.8%	6.7%	9.2%
Experts	27.3%	31.7%	55.2%	41.1%
Officials, police, army	7.0%	11.4%	11.7%	11.2%
Service workers	14.5%	17.6%	8.4%	13.4%
Skilled workers and craftsmen	37.1%	26.4%	7.9%	18.5%
Workers and framers	8.6%	11.1%	10.0%	6.5%
In total	99.9%	99.9%	100.0%	99.9%

*Source:* Popović, 2015; ARS, 2010, 2019; Gundogan, 2022.

Nine years later, this has not changed significantly (about 50% of experts and managers among parents of students versus about 33% of experts and managers in the general population). In both periods, the children of skilled workers, artisans, farmers, service workers and traders were underrepresented in the student population, although the situation is somewhat better in 2019 than in 2010. These data are similar to data from other Eastern European countries that participated in the EUROSTUDENT V survey (Savić & Živadinović, 2016, p. 30).

### 3.2. Education of parents

In Table 8, the structure of education levels in general population and among the parents of students is compared.

**Table 8** Education level in the labor force and the population aged 15 and over and among parents of students, in percent

	2010		2022		2019		
	Labor force		Parents of Students		Population aged 15 years and older	Parents of Students	
	Men	Women	Fathers	Mothers	All	Mothers	Fathers
No school	0.6%	1.0%	0.1%	0.2%	1.0%	-	-
Incomplete basic	3.5%	5.6%	0.3%	0.4%	5.3%	-	-
Basic	21.9%	25.9%	3.8%	5.9%	17.8%	4.5%	5.5%
High School	60.9%	51.6%	51.8%	55.5%	53.1%	59.0%	58.4%
College and university	13.3%	15.9%	38.2%	33.0%	22.5%	31.3%	31.7%
Other			5.9%	5.1%	0.4%	5.2%	4.3%
In total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Popović, 2015, p. 22-23; Gundogan, 2022, p. 73; RZS, 2022.

The largest number of working men and women have completed high school. Among the students, there are also the most who state that their parents graduated from high school (52% of students claim this for their father, and 55% of students for their mother, in 2010). In 2019, there are slightly more students with parents who completed high school (about 59%) than there are people with a high school diploma in the general population (about 53%). Disproportions in relation to the working population appear among students whose parents completed more or less than high school. Compared to 26% of working men with primary education, only 4.2% of students state that their father has less than a high school education. The situation is similar for working women and mothers of students. Among working women, 32.5% have less than a high school education, and students report that their mothers have less than a high school education in only 6.5% of cases. Nine years later, about 24% of the population of Serbia (15 years and older) has less than high school, while this percentage is 4.5% among students' fathers, and 5.5% - among students' mothers. That this group is underrepresented in the student population is also shown by data from earlier research (Savić & Živadinović, 2016, p. 32). On the other hand, in 2010, compared to 13.3% of older and highly educated men among the working population, there are 38.2% of students who state that their parents graduated from college or university. When it comes to the female part of the working population and mothers of students, the ratio is 15.9% of more and highly educated women in the working population versus 33% of students who state that their mother has a higher or higher education. According to data from the 2019 Labor Force Survey (RZS, 2019, p. 26), 32% of students have highly educated parents, while the percentage of highly educated people in the general population (15 years and older) is about 22%.

Therefore, the social structure of the student population does not reflect the social structure of society: the representation of those whose parents are highly educated is much higher in the student population than in society in general. On the other hand, students from families of lower social status (observed on the basis of parents' education and occupation) have a difficult access to higher education.

### 3.3. Students with disabilities

There is not enough data to assess trends in higher education coverage of persons with disabilities. The number of persons with disabilities who are reported to have completed



seventh-level university education is 18,048. This means that a total of 3.2% of persons with disabilities are university educated, as well as that persons with disabilities make up 2.8% of the total population with a university degree in the Republic of Serbia (Nikolajević & Mirić, 2019, pp. 231-255). Some of the factors that make access to higher education difficult for people with disabilities in Serbia are the inaccessibility of buildings and rooms in higher education institutions, as well as teaching materials. The lack of reliable data on the number of students with disabilities studying at universities in Serbia makes it difficult to create effective measures to improve the position of students with disabilities.

### 3.4. Students of Roma nationality

Roma represent the most uneducated segment of the Serbian population. Among the students, there are less than one per thousand. The number of students of Roma nationality at the beginning of the 2000s was 0.03% and in the following five years it increased to 0.06% (Ministarstvo prosvete, 2008, p. 48). The largest part of students of Roma nationality (50%) studies in Vojvodina. As in the entire student population and in the population of Roma students, there are more female students (53.9%). The failure to prepare Roma children for higher education begins already in elementary school.

According to the data from the Survey of Multiple Indicators of the Position of Women and Children in Serbia (MICS5), 31% of children from Roma settlements do not enroll in primary school on time, and one third of children from the poorest households and from Roma settlements do not finish it on time. The percentage of enrollment in primary school was 97%, but for children from Roma settlements it was 69.1%. The net rate of primary school attendance was 98.5% (Roma 84.9%). The primary school completion rate was 93.4% (Roma 64%). Children from Roma settlements (22%) and the poorest children (74%) attend secondary school significantly less often compared to the national average (89%) (Klašnja, 2020, p. 14).

Higher education reformers are faced with the question of *what higher education institutions can do for greater openness towards all persons who make up our society - regardless of their origin, gender, race and nationality, socio-economic status and other attributes that define us socially.*

Systemic measures to support higher education in Serbia include: financing of higher education from the national budget; subsidizing living expenses through accommodation in student dormitories and meals in student restaurants and financial support for students through student scholarships and loans (Popović, 2015). The largest part of allocations for higher education goes to cover the *costs of education*. The participation of the state in *covering students' living expenses* is much smaller (through subsidizing student centers and awarded scholarships and loans) (Popović, 2015). Almost all means of public financing of higher education are intended for students of *state universities* and their distribution is primarily determined by success (criterion of excellence, that is, meritocratic, not social criterion). A very small part of the public financing of higher education is intended for the improvement of the social dimension of higher education (10% of places in the dormitory and 10% of scholarships and loans). These investments from public funds have an impact on the improvement of the social dimension to the extent that members of "sensitive" groups are gradually included through greater overall coverage, but very little is being done to reduce the disparity in participation.

As part of the Tempus project EQUIED - "Equal access for all: Strengthening the social dimension in order to strengthen the European area of higher education", a proposal of measures that should be taken in order to provide access to higher education to different groups of the population was prepared. Certainly no less important is the activity of the *Center for Educational Policies (COP)*, as an independent multidisciplinary research center that provides professional support to decision makers and practitioners in the development, implementation and evaluation of policies in the field of education.

#### 4. CULTURAL-VALUE DIVERSITY OF THE STUDENT POPULATION

Students are the most educated part of the young generation, who are expected to advocate certain values of modern society as future leaders. This is particularly important if we consider that education is an instrument for the development of human capital, not only as future employees, but also as future citizens of a society. Namely, the university must assume a role for the development of society as a whole, as well as for the education of an academic citizen who is capable of a critical attitude towards the world.

If those from the middle class and those who live in larger areas enter the faculty, then the values of these social strata prevail at the universities. However, with the tendency of "massification of education", we are simultaneously facing an increase in the socioeconomic and cultural value diversity of the student population. Namely, if the tendency of the development of higher education is to be more and more massive and to open access to various categories of the young generation, it may happen that this leads to heterogeneity of their value orientations, depending on where they come from.

What characterizes the student population, and which at the same time applies to all young people, is their belonging to a heterogeneous social group, which, on the one hand, is marked by internal social stratification (linked to the differentiation of the society to which they belong), and, on the other hand, by the possession of some common characteristics by which they are recognized as a separate social group. In other words, in addition to generational specificity, which marks students, and young people in general, as recognizable social groups, there are also intragenerational differences (related to their different degrees of individual and social maturity, as well as to social origins, types of socialization, subcultural features). In this context, we cannot talk about certain values of the student population, as opposed to some who are not students, or as opposed to some who are adults, etc. Within the student population itself, we will now have a mirroring of diverse values accepted by different parts of society. The more diverse the student population is, the less useful is the information that someone is a student, if we want to predict how they will behave, whether and how they will vote, what values they will accept, for the simple reason that it can be expected that through, and in the student population, also reflect the general diversity of value orientations of the population as a whole.

If we accept the argument that the functioning of modern society (and the society of the near future) requires a large number of highly educated people, and if we accept the requirement that massification should simultaneously guarantee the diversity of the student population, so that it reflects the structure of the population as a whole, then public policies in the area of higher education should search for the form and content of higher education that *educates a large number of people in a better way, with different prior knowledge, cognitive capacities and value orientations*. If up to 55% of the generation enrolls in studies (according to the Strategy of Higher Education in Serbia until 2020), then we have to count on the fact that a part of those

students have overcome the high school program with difficulties, and are not completely ready to accept studies as a search for knowledge, independently solves various problems and explains and defends its own approach and its own solution.

*"The problem that a modern university must solve is how to determine and maintain a high level and high quality of teaching, while at the same time a student of average (or even below average) abilities can master that level"* (Popović & Đorić, 2011, p. 301-325). This actualizes the issue of *teaching methodology in higher education*, which is already open at lower levels of education, i.e. the individualization of teaching adapted to students with different prior knowledge, preferences and capacities.

## 5. QUALITY CONTROL OF HIGHER EDUCATION

"Historically, the concept of quality control and the quality control movement is associated with serial production in which the characteristics of each individual product must correspond to a predefined quality standard. To the extent that higher education has become "serial production", such that students educated at university, they often continue their education at another university or are employed in another country, standardization of quality, i.e. quality assurance and control of higher education is becoming an increasingly important topic and movement" (Popović & Đorić, 2011, p. 320).

The point of view that we represent and promote in this text is that mechanisms for ensuring and controlling the quality of higher education (in the context of mass higher education and oriented towards the needs of the professional labor market) should first of all enable the assessment of the quality of *learning outcomes - clear descriptions of what a student should know, understands and knows how to do after completing studies*.

The product of the educational process is the knowledge and skills of each individual student acquired during this process (qualification). Clearly, transparently and precisely defined learning outcomes are specifications of standard product features of the educational process. *Quality control is then an assessment of the extent to which the characteristics of the students' demonstrated knowledge and skills correspond to the set quality standards*.

If we have correctly posed the problem to which the reform of higher education is aimed - the organization of mass higher education and the second-order problems arising from it, then a possible criterion for evaluating the proposed solutions would be - to what extent the proposed reform/s enables the education of a large number of highly educated experts whose qualifications (learning outcomes) best match mass demand in a developed, free and open professional labor market.

This way of formulating the evaluation criteria of public policies in the field of higher education actualizes the problem of simultaneous reform of the professional labor market. Our position is that without a *mass demand* for highly educated experts in a *free and open* professional labor market, no public policy in the field of higher education can be meaningfully *evaluated*. The assumptions of a successful evaluation of public policies in this area are: 1) Accelerated individual transitions from education to work; the dominant channels used for these transitions should be related to quality - academic success. 2) Information about product quality - student learning outcomes, should be complete, clear and not cause confusion among "customers/users" - employers. 3) Success in studies should be a clear indicator of the quality of learning outcomes, and guarantee the efficient and high-quality performance of work that employers are looking for. 4) The principle of allocation to professional positions, and the legitimization of that allocation should be related to the efficient and high-quality performance

of work. Only in such a context would it be possible to evaluate which public policies best respond to the formulated problems of organization and financing of higher education in Serbia.

## 6. CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

The intention of this text was to formulate some of the, in our opinion, the most important problems that the reforms of higher education in Serbia should deal with. On the trail of already existing studies and public debates on the subject, we have formulated the following problems:

1. One of the main problems for which public policies in the field of higher education should find a solution is the organization (and financing) of *mass* higher education.
2. The mass of higher education, at least declaratively, also means the expansion of the scope of higher education, so that it includes groups that, according to available data and research findings, are represented among students to a lesser extent than in the general population. Therefore, public policies must find an answer to the problem of *equal access to higher education for all*.
3. Public policies aimed at reforming the financing of higher education, in addition to financing the costs of education, must also have on their agenda solutions for the *problem of financing the living costs of students*, if the coverage of the student population is to be extended to include persons with a lower socioeconomic status, and/or who do not they live in university centers. At the same time, financial support for living expenses must be guided by a *social criterion*, and not by a meritocratic criterion of excellence, as is the case now.
4. In the context of mass education, the modern university must solve the problem of determining and maintaining the *level and quality of teaching that can be mastered by a student of average (or even below average) abilities, aspirations and motivation in the given time*.
5. With the tendency of "massification and inclusiveness of higher education", we are also faced with an *increase in the cultural and value diversity of the student population*, because the diversity of value orientations of the population as a whole is mirrored in the student population. The inclusion of a diverse student population in higher education in terms of aspirations, motivations, abilities, value orientations opens the *issue of teaching methodology in higher education*, which is already open at lower levels of education: individualization of teaching contents and learning methods, and the problem of teaching value-sensitive teaching contents.

In this text, we have not offered solutions to these problems (some of the solutions have been developed elsewhere (Đorić, 2015; Đorić, 2011), but we have formulated evaluation criteria for alternative solutions that can be conceived in the debates. implement those public policies in higher education that to the greatest extent enable the education of a large number of highly educated experts whose qualifications (learning outcomes) best match the *mass demand in the developed, free and open professional labor market*. We emphasized that the mass demand for experts in the free market of professional work is a necessary precondition for the evaluation of public policies in the field of higher education, because only under this assumption can a connection be established between quality teaching, success in studies, allocation to professional positions and efficient and quality performance of work.

Otherwise, any public policy in the field of higher education is a blind shot.

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## **IZAZOVI VISOKOG OBRAZOVANJA U SRBIJI – PRILOG JAVNOJ RASPRAVI O REFORMI VISOKOG OBRAZOVANJA**

*Visoko obrazovanje je, kao oblast od velikog javnog interesa, predmet niza državnih akcija, zakona i alokacije finansijskih resursa. Reforma/e u oblasti visokog obrazovanja pretpostavljaju da smo identifikovali probleme u visokom obrazovanju i da imamo kriterijume na osnovu kojih ćemo evaluirati reformska rešenja i opredeliti se za ono/a koji te kriterijume najbolje zadovoljavaju. Namera ovog teksta je da doprinese identifikaciji i razumevanju nekih od problema kojima bi javne politike u oblasti visokog obrazovanja trebalo da se pozabave i da ponudi kriterijum za evaluaciju ponuđenih rešenja. Kao osnovne probleme visokog obrazovanja (u Srbiji) identifikovali smo - masovnost i zahtev za kontrolom kvaliteta koji proizlazi iz potrebe standardizacije svake "serijske" proizvodnje, potrebu za proširenjem obuhvata podzastupljenim društvenim grupama, potrebu za finansijskom i drugom podrškom podzastupljenim društvenim grupama, koje proizlaze iz kombinacije masovnosti i inkluzivnosti visokog obrazovanja, povećanje raznorodnosti studentske populacije u pogledu sposobnosti, aspiracija, motivacije i vrednosnih orijentacija, i potrebu za inovacijama u metodici nastave u visokom obrazovanju, koja iz toga proizlazi.*

*Ključne reči: javne politike, reforma, visoko obrazovanje, inkluzivno visoko obrazovanje, kontrola kvaliteta visokog obrazovanja, evaluacija*