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TOWARDS INTEGRATING FORENSIC ACCOUNTING IN UNIVERSITY CURRICULA: EVIDENCE FROM STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract: *The subject of this paper is the perception of students regarding the discipline known as forensic accounting. The aim of the paper is to identify the challenges related to the broader application of this discipline in management and information technology studies. The analysis was conducted on a sample of 70 management and IT students from the University of Belgrade, enabling a preliminary assessment of perception and the potential for improving educational and institutional mechanisms to further affirm forensic accounting in higher education and business practice. The obtained results were interpreted using descriptive statistics, Spearman's correlation analysis, and exploratory factor analysis, aiming to identify latent dimensions that shape student attitudes toward this interdisciplinary field.*
Keywords: *Forensic accounting, curricula, student perceptions.*

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1. Introduction

Many companies around the world today are exposed to various risks stemming from dishonest or unethical practices. Forensic accounting, as a fundamental pillar in the fight against financial crime, involves the use of accounting, auditing, and investigative skills to determine whether fraud has occurred within an organization, whether in the private or public sector. Forensic accounting plays an irreplaceable role in protecting company assets and profits (capital), which includes the need for broad knowledge of fraud as well as advanced financial expertise. In addition, a solid understanding of business realities and the functioning of the legal system is necessary. Viewed in this way, the profession of forensic accounting is deeply embedded in modern business and finance and represents an evaluative discipline. Forensic accounting can be seen as one of the most effective means of reducing and controlling

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accounting fraud, which is why auditors and forensic accountants need to develop robust systems and controls.

Financial irregularities, fraud, and corruption threaten a large number of entities globally, regardless of their size, industry, or geographic location. Among other things, management can contribute to the prevention of tax evasion through the implementation of forensic accounting techniques and control mechanisms. Practice has shown that in a significant number of cases, top executives within organizations are the very individuals committing fraud, even though they are expected to ensure the protection of the resources entrusted to them. It often happens that losses resulting from employee fraud exceed the losses incurred from business transactions with customers.

The role of the forensic auditor in prosecutorial procedures involving state organizations is of particular importance for safeguarding the integrity of public funds. Given the large number of cases involving financial disputes, it is inconceivable to resolve them efficiently without the strong support of forensic accounting, whose product, the report on suspicious transactions, is especially significant as evidence in court proceedings. Forensic accountants are expected to thoroughly analyze financial records. In Serbia, forensic accounting is entering a more dynamic phase of development in which financial expertise is being transformed into an indispensable tool in the fight against financial crime. It is critically important that continuous research efforts be directed toward improving existing methodologies and practices relevant to the effective management of abuse and fraud risks in both the private and public sectors.

In recent decades, there has been a rise in financial crime, which, due to technological advancements and various innovations, has become increasingly sophisticated and harder to detect. This has led to a redefinition of the roles of conventional accountants and auditors. The integration of data analytics into forensic procedures has revolutionized fraud detection, increasing both accuracy and efficiency. It has significantly influenced the redesign of forensic accounting methodologies, which by nature is a multi-layered discipline. AI-powered forensic tools have further enhanced the process of risk management of fraudulent activities. This raises the question of whether internal and external auditors can protect themselves against fraud through periodic audit procedures. In this context, ethical leadership and internal control systems hold a special place in the process of preventing various types of financial fraud, including that found in financial reports.

In today's dynamic environment, senior management is faced with an overwhelming amount of information (Lakshmi & Menon, 2016). This leads to the need for proactive measures to ensure the authenticity of financial reporting systems, which are subject to verification by external auditors. Accordingly, there is a growing need to develop a new strategy that will provide a platform for high-quality financial information.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, an overview of the existing literature is provided, followed by a discussion of the research method. Next, the results are presented, accompanied by a discussion of the implications of the findings, followed by concluding remarks that include limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review

Even before the Industrial Revolution, various scandals posed a problem for society. Today, the detection of unusual patterns that may be validated as fraud falls within the job description of forensic accountants, who use data analysis tools and specialized investigative techniques for this purpose. Their skills and experience in evaluating evidence and preparing investigative reports provide significant support in legal proceedings. When observing the practical contributions of forensic accounting, it becomes clear that forensic accountants operate in two

main areas: first, as expert witnesses in court proceedings, and second, as consultants in improving internal control systems, which serve as a key pillar for effective fraud risk management in both the public and private sectors (Hermiyetti, 2025). As the accounting and auditing professions have evolved, their duties, responsibilities, and expectations have become increasingly well-defined.

To find appropriate solutions to certain types of disputes, whether in private or public life, knowledge of accounting, auditing, law, and modern IT is required. This need is even more pronounced in situations where law and accounting intersect, with particular emphasis on fraud auditing. This intersection led to the emergence of both forensic accounting and forensic auditing.

The list of stakeholders who may use forensic audit services is quite broad. It includes lawyers, police, various law enforcement agencies, insurance companies, banks, courts, companies from various sectors, government representatives, and government entities. Why is it important to engage a forensic accountant instead of a traditional accountant? What's the difference? A forensic accountant applies a systematic approach to investigating and identifying fraudulent activities. Auditing, fraud auditing, and forensic accounting are considered closely related fields, with significant overlap among their components.

In most developed countries, some organizations offer a wide range of services in the field of forensic accounting and fraud auditing (Aksoy & Uzay, 2021), often under different names. A new perception of accounting and auditing has become imperative. Auditing knowledge and expertise will be useful in fraud audits and forensic accounting, while mastering the technical and scientific aspects of accounting will positively impact fraud auditing. The three main areas of activity within forensic accounting are fraud auditing or investigative accounting (administrative support), litigation support (legal support), and expert testimony (professional witness services). Fraud risk indicators are especially important within forensic accounting.

For a long time, forensic accounting was treated as a reactive discipline, intervening only after financial abuse or fraud occurred, and showed many similarities with the public accountant profession. Traditionally, this profession would conduct activities such as investigations, analysis, and the generation of forensic reports with findings relevant to legal proceedings. However, due to the increasing complexity of financial transactions and the dynamic development of corporate structures, the need for a proactive approach to forensic accounting has become more pronounced. This modern approach emphasizes anticipating, detecting, and preventing fraudulent activity before it escalates, thus giving forensic accounting a new dimension (Vutumu, 2024).

Forensic accounting, the investigation of financial irregularities and fraud, is increasingly using artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence improves data analysis, automates fraud detection and effectively identifies patterns in large data sets (Prabhudesai, & Kamat, 2025). Big data is becoming essential for every sector as it will provide decision makers with very important and critical information. Analyzing big data will lead to an understanding of work patterns and help a forensic accountant detect any anticipated fraud (Kayed & Al-Sartawi, 2024).

The increasing number of cases of corruption and financial fraud seems to encourage the inclusion of forensic accounting in the educational curriculum, especially in developing countries. There is a growing demand for forensic accounting education due to the increasing number of fraud cases. Students consider forensic accounting professionals to be key in preventing and reducing fraud incidents and improving the quality of financial reporting. However, there are several challenges hindering the expansion of forensic accounting education in India, such as limited awareness, insufficient resources, lack of trained faculty and perceived lack of career opportunities. Furthermore, the underrepresentation of the multidisciplinary

nature of forensic accounting and the struggle to balance theory and practice are additional obstacles. Despite these obstacles, there is great interest among students in integrating forensic accounting topics into the existing curriculum (Chetry, et al., 2025). "Fraud is on the rise, and detection is becoming more difficult as technology changes. It is very important to increase awareness and strengthen the knowledge of forensic accounting among students entering the accounting field, and such education should be mandatory, including interviewing/questioning skills, which are extremely important." (Kramer et al., 2017).

3. Analysis of survey results

This study employed a questionnaire consisting of 15 items designed to assess student attitudes, awareness, and perceptions of forensic accounting. The questions from the questionnaire are presented in Table 1. All items were rated using a five-point Likert scale, considered one of the most reliable and commonly used methods for measuring latent psychological constructs, such as attitudes, opinions, or behavioural intentions (Boone & Boone, 2012). The offered responses, along with their annotation using the Likert scale, are shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Questionnaire items

Code	Question:
Q1	Do you believe that cases of business fraud have become more frequent in recent years?
Q2	To what extent do you agree with the statement: I am familiar with the concept of forensic accounting?
Q3	How often have you heard or read about forensic accounting so far?
Q4	How interested are you in the field of forensic accounting?
Q5	To what extent do you agree with the statement: There is limited awareness of the importance of forensic accounting among students?
Q6	To what extent do you agree with the statement: Students often believe that forensic accounting does not offer sufficient career opportunities?
Q7	To what extent do you agree with the statement: Students do not clearly understand how forensic accounting differs from traditional accounting?
Q8	To what extent do you agree with the statement: Forensic accounting is still not perceived as a key area in the fight against financial crime?
Q9	To what extent do you agree with the statement: The multidisciplinary nature of forensic accounting is not adequately represented in educational programs?
Q10	To what extent do you agree with the statement: Educational programs rely too heavily on theory and lack practical components?
Q11	To what extent do you agree with the statement: Faculties do not offer enough specialized courses that integrate law, IT, and accounting in a forensic context?
Q12	To what extent do you agree with the statement: Introducing specialized courses and workshops on forensic accounting could attract more students to this field?
Q13	To what extent do you agree with the statement: Including forensic accounting in the academic curriculum would increase its visibility and recognition in the industry?
Q14	To what extent do you agree with the statement: The media and professional journals should pay more attention to forensic accounting in protecting economic interests?
Q15	To what extent do you agree with the statement: Launching public campaigns that explain the value of forensic accounting could attract more talent to this field?

Table 2. Response options and their labelling according to the Likert scale

	Questions		
Likert Scale	**Q1, Q5-Q15**	**Q3**	**Q4**
1	Strongly agree	Very frequently	Very interested
2	Somewhat agree	Frequently	Somewhat interested
3	Neither agree nor disagree	Occasionally	Mostly not interested
4	Somewhat disagree	Rarely	Neutral
5	Strongly disagree	Never	Not interested at all

The questionnaire was completed by a total of 70 students enrolled in study programs related to the fields of Information Technology and Management, offered at faculties within the University of Belgrade. Among them, 39 students were enrolled in IT-related programs, and 31 were in Management-related programs. The student survey was conducted via a Google Form in May 2025. The structure of the respondents is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Structure of research respondents

Gender	**Number**	**Year of study**	**Number**
Female	32	First	11
Male	38	Second	18
Study program:		Third	26
IT	39	Fourth	15
Management	31	First	11

Cronbach's Alpha is one of the most used coefficients for assessing internal consistency, i.e., the reliability of a model in measuring the desired latent construct—how well multiple items in a questionnaire measure the same latent construct (DeVellis, 2016). This indicator shows how well individual items align with each other and is used to validate scales involving multi-level responses, such as the Likert scale used in this questionnaire. Coefficient values range from 0 to 1, with values above 0.70 considered acceptable, and those above 0.80 and 0.90 interpreted as high reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

In this study, the calculated Cronbach's alpha for the 15-item questionnaire was 0.86, indicating a high level of internal consistency and justifying the combined use of the items to measure the latent construct: students' attitudes toward forensic accounting. For the calculation of the Cronbach's alpha value in this research, a manually implemented function in Python was used, utilizing the pandas and numpy libraries..

To examine the interrelationships between the 15 items that make up the questionnaire on perception and awareness of forensic accounting, Spearman's rho correlation was applied. This method was chosen because all items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, which represents ordinal data. Unlike Pearson's correlation, which requires interval data and assumes a linear relationship and normal distribution, Spearman's correlation is non-parametric and measures the monotonic relationship between the ranked values of two variables (Field, 2018). The correlation values were calculated using the corr(method='spearman') function from the pandas library in the Python programming language.

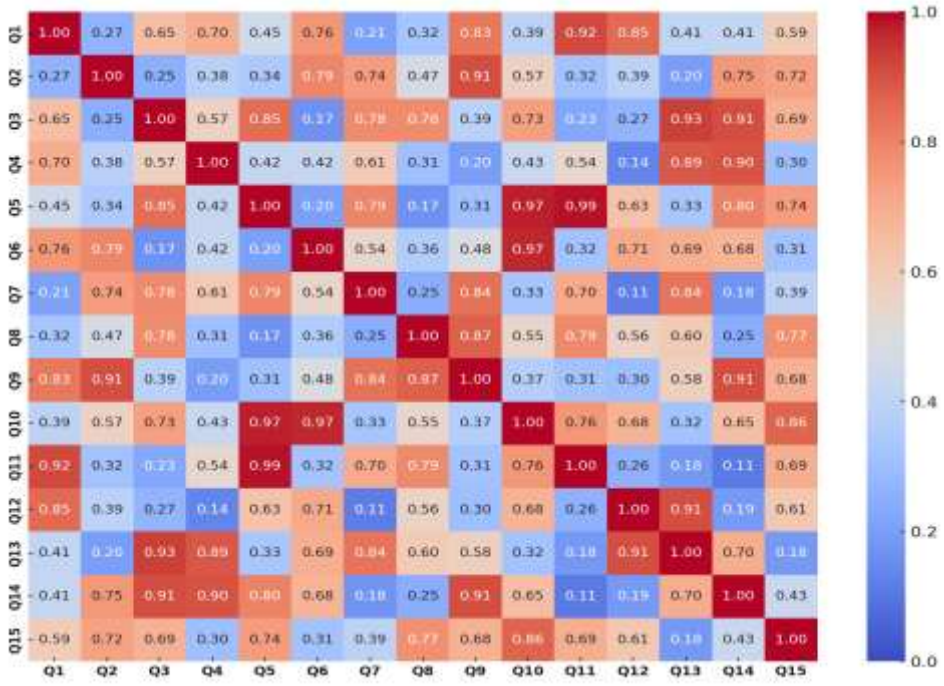

Figure 1. Matrix of mutual correlations among questionnaire items

The Spearman correlation matrix shown in Figure 1 indicates that most item pairs exhibit positive and statistically significant relationships. The strongest correlations were identified between the following item pairs:

- Q9 and Q10 (ϱ = 0.77): Connect perceptions of insufficient multidisciplinarity in education with the dominance of theoretical content.
- Q12 and Q13 (ϱ = 0.68): Indicate a coherent attitude toward the importance of institutional inclusion of forensic accounting in curricula.
- Q14 and Q15 (ϱ = 0.72): Link the significance of media and public promotion with attracting new talent.
- Q10 and Q11 (ϱ = 0.61): Support consistency between the perception of theoretical orientation and the lack of integration of law, IT, and accounting.

The high correlations mentioned above suggest cognitive coherence among respondents regarding educational and social aspects of the development of the forensic accounting field, as well as potential stability of latent dimensions within the questionnaire.

The number of respondents who gave a particular answer to each questionnaire item is presented in Tables 4 and 5. The results of the study conducted on a sample of 70 respondents indicate a low level of awareness and knowledge about forensic accounting among students. As many as 30% of respondents completely denied being familiar with the concept of forensic accounting, while 44% reported that they had heard about it rarely or never (Q2). Interest in this field is also limited, with 57% of respondents stating that they are mostly or not at all interested in the subject (Q4).

Table 4. Number of respondents who provided specific answers to questionnaire items (all except P3 and P4)

Questions / Answers	**Q1**	**Q2**	**Q5**	**Q6**	**Q7**	**Q8**	**Q9**	**Q10**	**Q11**	**Q12**	**Q13**	**Q14**	**Q15**
Strongly agree	23	11	18	11	12	18	31	43	38	12	13	14	15
Somewhat agree	22	19	25	15	20	23	22	15	21	38	32	38	34
Neither agree nor disagree	11	9	22	26	25	20	13	9	6	21	21	22	22
Somewhat disagree	10	10	5	18	7	9	3	1	4	7	12	5	11
Strongly disagree	4	21	0	0	6	0	1	2	1	2	5	3	0

Table 5. Number of respondents who provided specific answers to questions P3 and P4

Questions / Answers:	**Q3**		**Q4**
Very often	7	Very interested	4
Often	19	Somewhat interested	15
Occasionally	13	Neutral	10
Rarely	18	Mostly not interested	26
Never	13	Not at all interested	14

The results of the conducted study provide several important insights into students' awareness, attitudes, and educational needs related to forensic accounting. First and foremost, it is evident that more than 64.3% of respondents strongly believe or believe in some extent that business fraud has increased in recent years (Q1), indicating a high level of awareness regarding the relevance of this issue in the contemporary business environment. However, despite acknowledging its importance, students' familiarity with forensic accounting remains limited, more than half of them, reports rarely or never have encountered the term (Q3), while nearly 71% od respondents express a low level of personal interest in the field (Q4) or is neutral about the matter.

There is a prevalent perception among respondents that students generally lack awareness of the importance of forensic accounting (Q5), a view supported by over 61% of participants. Additionally, more than one-third of students believe that the field does not offer sufficient career opportunities (Q6), with a considerable number remaining neutral, pointing to a lack of reliable information and motivation. Furthermore, over 45% of respondents feel that the differences between forensic and traditional accounting are not clearly communicated within their educational programs (Q7), making it harder for students to understand the field's specific nature.

Institutional shortcomings in academic curricula are also strongly recognized. More than 58% of respondents agree that forensic accounting is not seen as a central component in combating financial crime (Q8), while approximately 75% believe that its multidisciplinary nature is inadequately represented in current academic offerings (Q9). Alarmingly, over 80% of students indicate that their educational programs are overly theoretical and lack practical components (Q10). A similarly high proportion agrees that there is a lack of specialized courses that integrate knowledge from accounting, law, and information technology in a forensic context (Q11).

On a more positive note, the findings reveal strong support for initiatives aimed at increasing the visibility and attractiveness of the field. Over 70% of students believe that the introduction of specialized courses and workshops could foster greater interest among students (Q12), and a similar proportion thinks that integrating forensic accounting into the formal

curriculum would enhance its recognition within the professional community (Q13). Moreover, more than 70% agree that media and professional journals should dedicate more attention to forensic accounting (Q14), and nearly the same share supports the idea that public campaigns could help popularize the discipline among younger generations (Q15). The collected data indicate a need for strategic reforms in education and promotion of forensic accounting to enhance its perception and strengthen its role in protecting the economic interests of the Republic of Serbia.

4. Exploratory factor analysis

To assess whether the dataset is suitable for factor analysis, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test for sampling adequacy was applied. The KMO test measures the proportion of variance among variables that might be common variance, by comparing correlations among variables to partial correlations (Kaiser, 1974). KMO coefficient values range between 0 and 1, with higher values indicating greater suitability for factor analysis. To calculate the KMO coefficient using the Python programming language, the factor_analyzer library was utilized. For the set of 15 Likert-type items used in this study, a KMO value of 0.73 was computed, indicating sufficient shared variance among items and confirming that the dataset is appropriate for conducting exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Additionally, Bartlett's test of sphericity (Bartlett, 1950) was conducted to assess whether the correlation matrix significantly differs from an identity matrix—i.e., whether there are statistically significant correlations among the observed items. If the null hypothesis is rejected, it means that factor analysis is methodologically justified, as there is sufficient interrelationship among variables. Bartlett's test for the dataset obtained through the questionnaire yielded a statistically significant p-value ($\chi^2(105) = 544.30$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the correlation matrix significantly deviates from an identity matrix and confirming the presence of latent structure in the data, thereby justifying the use of factor analysis.

Before performing factor analysis, all items were standardized to eliminate the influence of differing scales and to provide a neutral mean with unit variance. The Principal Axis Factoring method was used for extracting latent factors. This method focuses on common variance and excludes specific and random components of variance, emphasizing the structure that can be explained by common latent factors. Following extraction, varimax orthogonal rotation was applied. This rotation method aims to maximize the variance of factor loadings within each factor and to achieve clearer and more interpretable factor structures, where each item has a high loading on one factor and low loadings on others (Costello & Osborne, 2005).

To determine the number of factors, an eigenvalue analysis of the correlation matrix of standardized items was conducted. Eigenvalues were calculated using the numpy.linalg.eig() function and represent the amount of total variance explained by each potential factor. Based on the computed eigenvalues, a scree plot (Cattell, 1966) was constructed. This plot displays eigenvalues in descending order for each latent factor derived from the correlation matrix and is suitable for selecting the number of factors for factor analysis. The x-axis of the plot shows the ordinal number of factors, while the y-axis shows the corresponding eigenvalue, representing the amount of variance in the data explained by that factor. In the plot shown in Figure 2, an inflection point (or "elbow") is observed after the second and third factors, with the break being more pronounced after the third factor. This suggests a turning point in the contribution of additional factors to the total variance in the dataset. After the fifth factor, the eigenvalues drop below 1. According to Kaiser's criterion, which states that in factor analysis, it is advisable to retain factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 (since these factors explain more variance than a single item), up to five factors may be retained in the performed factor analysis (Kaiser, 1960).

Based on the scree plot and to ensure model simplicity and robustness, favoring solutions with fewer factors when they are theoretically and empirically meaningful, it was decided to retain three factors in the model.

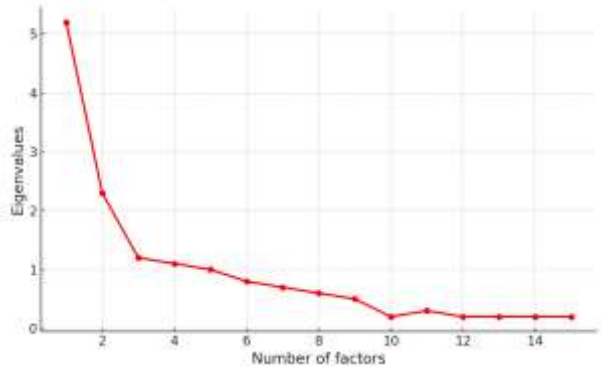

Figure 2. Scree Plot for the dataset obtained from the questionnaire

In Python, the class FactorAnalysis from the sklearn.The decomposition library was used to perform the exploratory factor analysis, with the parameter n_components = 3 to extract three latent factors. In addition to extracting the factors, this class calculates factor loadings, which represent the contribution of each item (question) to each of the three factors. These loadings are correlation coefficients between each item and the factor; the higher the absolute value of the loading, the more strongly the item is associated with that factor and contributes to its interpretation.

The three latent factors were conceptualized as follows:

1. F1: Educational and Institutional Support (Systemic Framework), this factor encompasses attitudes regarding the quality and role of the educational system in promoting forensic accounting. The items with the highest loadings for this factor were: Q9 (0.85), Q10 (0.79), Q11 (0.62), and Q12 (0.54). High loadings were recorded for items related to the lack of interdisciplinary courses, the dominance of a theoretical approach, and the need for the introduction of specialized workshops and courses.
2. F2: Personal Awareness and Engagement, this factor measures the personal level of interest, awareness, and perception of the importance of forensic accounting. The items with the highest loadings for this factor were: Q3 (−0.86), Q4 (−0.77), Q2 (−0.64), Q5 (−0.63), and Q6 (−0.52). The items with the strongest negative factor loadings indicate low exposure to the topic, limited interest, and a perception of insufficient visibility of this field among students.
3. F3: Public Recognition and Media Promotion, this factor refers to the societal visibility of forensic accounting and the need for its public promotion. The items with the highest loadings for this factor were: Q15 (0.88), Q14 (0.79), and Q13 (0.60).

For the three identified latent factors, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated. All three factors demonstrated a high level of internal consistency, with Cronbach's α values of 0.83 for educational support, 0.80 for personal awareness, and 0.84 for media visibility.

4.1. Analysis of latent factors in relation to respondent characteristics

An in-depth analysis of student attitudes toward forensic accounting was conducted by examining three latent dimensions extracted through EFA. In order to explore the potential influence of respondents' external characteristics, namely: gender, year of study, and academic program, on these latent dimensions, a combination of visual mapping, descriptive statistics,

and inferential testing was employed. The factor map presents a three-dimensional visualization of respondents distributed across the latent factor space, whereby factor scores were calculated for each respondent, representing their numerical coordinates on the three latent dimensions and reflecting how strongly they exhibit the characteristics of those factors. Factor scores were calculated as a linear combination of the standardized variables and the factor loadings. The formula used for factor score calculation is:

$$F_{ik} = \sum_{j=1}^{p} Z_{ij} \cdot \lambda_{jk} \tag{1}$$

where: Fik represents the factor score for respondent i on factor k, Zij is the standardized value of variable j for respondent i, and λjk is the factor loading of variable j on factor k.

In addition to factor scores, external variables were added to the maps through visual coding of the points in diagrams. To construct 3D scatter plots, the matplotlib library in the Python programming language was used.

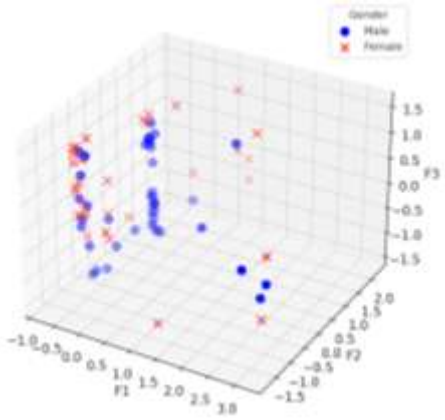

Figure 3. Factor map by respondents' gender

The factor map displayed in Figure 3 shows the distribution of respondents by gender in the latent space defined by the three extracted factors. Respondents were visually differentiated by gender, with blue circles representing male students and red x markers representing female students. The spatial arrangement reveals that male respondents are more evenly dispersed across the full range of factor scores, particularly along the second dimension (F2), suggesting greater heterogeneity of individual perspectives within this group. Female respondents, on the other hand, tend to be positioned more distinctly along the F3 axis, clustering in regions associated with higher scores. This distribution implies a stronger emphasis among female students on the societal and media relevance of forensic accounting, aligning with broader trends in gendered sensitivity to public interest and institutional communication.

Descriptive statistics based on the factor scores, which are shown in Table 6, further illuminate these trends. On the first factor (F1), representing educational and institutional support, male and female respondents report nearly identical mean scores with no meaningful divergence. This suggests a shared perception across genders regarding the adequacy and role of the academic system in promoting forensic accounting. On the second factor (F2), male students demonstrate a higher average score (0.104) relative to females (−0.132), potentially reflecting a greater degree of personal engagement and awareness within the group of male participants. The most pronounced difference appears on the third factor (F3), where female respondents exhibit a markedly higher mean score (0.288) compared to their male peers (−0.226), indicating stronger endorsement of public and media visibility for the field within the female subgroup.

Table 6. Mean values of factor scores by respondent characteristics

Factor	Gender		Study program		Year of study			
	Male	**Female**	**IT**	**Men**	**First**	**Second**	**Third**	**Fourth**
F1: Educational support	0.002	-0.003	0.005	-0.006	0.01	0.03	0.07	0.06
F2: Personal awareness	0.104	-0.132	0.002	-0.002	-0.02	0.00	0.06	0.03
F3: Media visibility	-0.226	0.288	0.424	-0.570	0.00	0.01	0.05	-0.02

To assess the statistical significance of these observed differences, Mann–Whitney U tests were conducted for each factor. The Mann–Whitney U test was used as this nonparametric test serves as an appropriate alternative to the independent samples t-test when the conditions of ordinal measurement and group independence are met (Field, 2018). The results, which are shown in Table 7, reveal no significant difference in F1 scores by gender, confirming findings of the descriptive analysis. For F2, the difference approaches significance ($p = 0.055$), pointing to a potential trend that may be more pronounced in larger or more diverse samples. Notably, the test for F3 yields a statistically significant result ($p = 0.006$), substantiating the visual and descriptive indications of gender-based variation in attitudes toward the public visibility of forensic accounting.

Taken together, these findings underscore the relevance of gender as a differentiating variable in shaping perceptions of specific dimensions of forensic accounting. While attitudes toward institutional support appear consistent across groups, female students demonstrate greater sensitivity to the societal recognition of the field, whereas male students express a broader range of engagement at the individual level. These insights highlight the importance of developing educational initiatives that are attuned to the diverse motivational profiles of students and suggest that communicative and promotional strategies in higher education should consider gender-informed approaches to foster deeper and more inclusive engagement with interdisciplinary topics such as forensic accounting.

Table 7. Results of the Mann–Whitney U test for comparing factor scores by respondent gender

Factor	U value	p-value	Significance
F1: Educational support	806	0.230	Not significant
F2: Personal awareness	873	0.055	Not significant
F3: Media visibility	433	0.006	**Significant**

The 3D factor map presented in Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of students from two academic programs within the latent factor space defined by three extracted dimensions. The spatial configuration of respondents reveals that students from the IT programs are more frequently positioned toward higher values on the F2 and F3 axes, suggesting that they demonstrate greater personal engagement with the topic of forensic accounting (F2), as well as a stronger emphasis on its public and media visibility (F3). In contrast, students in the management field are generally clustered closer to the origin or within the lower ranges of the F3 axis, indicating less pronounced concern for public engagement or institutional visibility of the field. Their distribution is relatively concentrated and symmetrical, implying a more uniform perception of forensic accounting, particularly in terms of educational and institutional dimensions (F1). This visual pattern is consistent with the results of the Mann–Whitney U test, whose results are presented in Table 8, which confirmed a statistically significant difference on F3 between the two groups ($p < 0.001$). While the average scores on F1 and F2, which are shown in Table 6, did not differ significantly among groups, the stronger projection of IT students along the F3 axis highlights a clear distinction in attitudes toward the public recognition and

media promotion of forensic accounting. This suggests that students in technical disciplines may be more attuned to the importance of communicating and promoting the field in public and societal contexts.

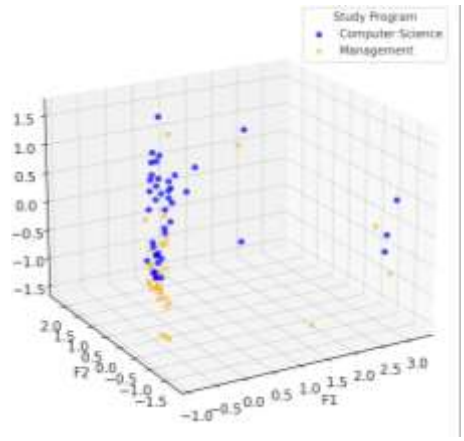

Figure 4. Factor map by respondents' study program

Table 8. Results of the Mann–Whitney U test for comparing factor scores by respondents' study program

Factor	U value	p-value	Significance
F1: Educational support	676	0.902	Not significant
F2: Personal awareness	619	0.463	Not significant
F3: Media visibility	1188	0.000	**Significant**

The factor map observed through the lens of the respondents' year of study is shown in Figure 5. The visualization presented in Figure 5 reveals notable variations across cohorts. First and second-year students appear more dispersed across the factor space, indicating diverse attitudes and levels of engagement with forensic accounting. Third-year students tend to cluster in regions associated with more positive perceptions of institutional and public relevance, suggesting growing awareness and interest. In contrast, fourth-year students are more concentrated around lower values on the F3 axis, reflecting reduced emphasis on the societal and media visibility of the field. The average factor scores by year of study offer additional support to the visual patterns observed in the factor map (Figure 5). First- and second-year students display lower and more dispersed scores across all three latent dimensions, indicating a wide range of initial attitudes and levels of familiarity with forensic accounting. Third-year students exhibit the highest mean scores on all factors, particularly on F1 and F2, suggesting a peak in awareness, institutional confidence, and recognition of the field's relevance. This upward trend, however, slightly reverses in the fourth year. While scores on F1 and F2 remain relatively high, the average score on F3 declines, reflecting reduced emphasis on the societal and media visibility of forensic accounting among more senior students.

Despite these observed trends, Spearman's rank correlation test, whose results are shown in Table 9, revealed no statistically significant association between the year of study and any of the latent dimensions. This result suggests that the differences, although observable, are not pronounced enough to indicate systematic attitudinal shifts based on academic seniority. The findings, therefore, emphasize the complexity of students' engagement with forensic accounting and the need for continuous reinforcement of its interdisciplinary and societal significance throughout the academic journey.

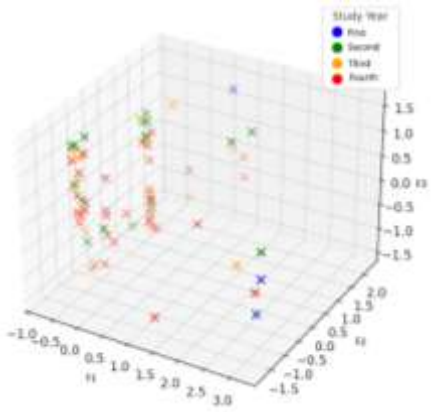

Figure 5. Factor map by respondents' year of study

Table 9. Results of Spearman's correlation between respondents' year of study and latent factors

Factor	Spearman ϱ	p-value	Significance
F1: Educational support	-0.041	0.724	Not significant
F2: Personal awareness	0.077	0.512	Not significant
F3: Media visibility	0.143	0.143	Not significant

5. Conclusion

The study highlights a clear gap between the growing relevance of forensic accounting and the current awareness, interest, and exposure among students of the University of Belgrade enrolled in IT and management-related programs. Although students recognize the rise in business fraud, most are unfamiliar with forensic accounting and show limited interest. Particularly, concerning is the fact that students perceive educational programs as overly theoretical and insufficiently oriented toward the practical and interdisciplinary application of this area. However, strong support exists for integrating specialized, practice-oriented courses and for broader promotion of the field through academic reform and public engagement. These findings suggest significant potential for developing forensic accounting as a recognized and attractive academic and professional path.

Exploratory factor analysis enabled the identification of three latent factors that structure student attitudes: educational and institutional support, personal awareness and engagement, and public recognition and media promotion. These factors jointly highlight the systemic, individual, and social dimensions that shape students' perspectives on forensic accounting. Findings show that gender plays a meaningful role in shaping perceptions, particularly regarding media visibility, where female students demonstrated significantly higher scores, suggesting a stronger concern for the societal relevance of the field. Male students, in contrast, exhibited a broader range of engagement on the personal awareness dimension. Program-based differences were most pronounced on the third factor, with IT students showing significantly greater emphasis on public and media visibility, as well as higher average engagement on the personal awareness axis. Management students, by comparison, showed more uniform and lower concern for these dimensions, clustering around the educational support factor.

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that there is a clear need for reform in educational policies and curricula, aimed at strengthening practical, multidisciplinary, and more visible programs that promote forensic accounting. It is also recommended that this field be more actively integrated into the media space and professional forums, along with the implementation of public campaigns that would improve its perception and attract new

professionals. Only through a comprehensive approach is it possible to enhance the status and societal importance of forensic accounting in the business environment of the Republic of Serbia. Furthermore, the results of the research underscore the importance of accounting for gender and disciplinary background when designing educational strategies and promotional efforts. Tailoring content and communication to reflect varying motivational profiles may enhance student engagement and strengthen the integration of forensic accounting within interdisciplinary academic contexts.

The results in this paper may assist educators who have not considered offering forensic accounting courses or who wish to enhance or update their existing forensic accounting education. Students seeking a career in forensic accounting can also use these scores to facilitate course selection and develop skills valued by employers. Academics and practitioners strongly agree on the importance of including forensic accounting education in the accounting curriculum, as it is an important area for effective fraud management.

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