



GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

THE CHALLENGES STUDENTS ARE FACING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Dejan Popović¹

¹University of Belgrade, Faculty of Law
Blvd. Kralja Aleksandara 67, Belgrade, Serbia

Professor Dejan Popović, PhD addressing the students and professors of Singidunum University on the occasion of 4 April, Belgrade University Students Day

Dear colleagues and students of Singidunum University,

I have been working at Belgrade University for forty years. I was an assistant professor when Professor Slobodan Unkovic held the vice dean post, and an associate professor when he became remarkably successful rector of the oldest Serbian university. My university career developed side by side with the career of your rector Professor Milovan Stanišić, who used to be the professor of the Faculty of Economics at that time. Professor Stanišić, along with Professor Unković and a number of other colleagues, undertook a great challenge of establishing a new university - Singidunum University. Responding to the will of professors and students, I was elected Rector of Belgrade University in 2004.

At that time we prepared the Law on Higher Education, which introduced Serbia into the Bologna study system and enabled us to become part of the European academic society. We have joined our efforts to create new institutions – one of them was “Conference of the Universities of Serbia“ (KONUS) within which the representatives of Belgrade and Singidunum University have always teamed in order to successfully defend academic values. The career path I pursued took me to the United Kingdom where I held the ambassador post for five years, but right after the expiration of my mandate I returned to the Faculty of Law. Today, I am quite honoured and pleased to be invited by my friends and very renowned colleagues, to visit Singidunum University again – and I am specially honoured for being provided with such an opportunity to address you, my dear colleagues. My aim is to briefly represent my viewpoint of student’s role in today’s world and the challenges, both the students and the universities are facing.



The students have always played an important role in Serbian society. In the 19th century, “*Licej*” (lyceum, the first institution of higher education in Serbia) and the Belgrade Higher School generated numerous state officials, industrials, diplomats and scientists who gave huge contribution to modernizing Serbia and by the beginning of the 20th century succeeded in making Serbia a proud, democratic country – a member of the thus existent Union of the European Nations. Belgrade University was a hub of anti-fascism fighters between the two world wars; thousands of its students died fighting for the liberation of Yugoslavia. In the post-war period, the students formed the heart of the urban population, making SFRY a respectable state worldwide. They represented the barrier that prevented or at least tried to stop the authoritative tendencies towards which the ruling powers in Yugoslavia, and after its disintegration, in Serbia as well, strived – back in 1968, 1992, 1996/97 and most recently in 2000. Having spent almost entire working life with the students, I think I am right when I am pointing out the importance of the role of the young and educated – even when depolitization is taking place and when the majority shares the belief that the things are finally settling into their place. The experience is telling us that tough periods are reoccurring but also that the voice of changes always wins.

According to the census from 2012, the number of university degree holders in the population older than 15 years was 10.6% which represents a slight but insufficient growth if we compare this figure with the percentage from the 1990s, when university degree holders constituted only 6.5% of the total population. If we put it into precise numbers, only 652,234 citizens acquired higher education. In Finland, for example, there is 39.3% of university degree holders, in the UK 39.4%, in the USA 42.5%, in Israel and Japan 46.4% , in Canada 51.3%, and in Russia 53.5%. You will notice that some of the highly developed countries, such as Germany, are not at the top of the list, but their prosperity is also provided by numerous vocational high schools, which we unfortunately do not have.

Although unemployment rates in Serbia are huge (up to 50% in the young population), the chances to get a job are a little bit higher for those who hold a university degree than for those who only have secondary education. The data that 34.4% of Serbian population above the age of 15 has only primary education is very painful. According to 2012 census, there were 2,121,400 of citizens who had only primary school. This is the best, or more precisely I would say the worst, indicator of the negligence of our society.

Under such circumstances, it is quite understandable that the number of students enrolling in the first year of bachelor studies is 50,000 on the annual basis, despite the financial difficulties the parents and secondary school graduates are facing. In 2013/14 school year, out of 53,564 first-year students, 83.9% enrolled in the state universities and higher schools, whereas 16.1% opted for the private ones. The data for the previous five years are similar, which indicates relative stability of this structure.

However, most of us, professors at both state and private universities, are aware of how rapidly the world around us is changing. Comparative researches show that many state-run institutions of higher education had to reorganize at the beginning of the 20th century, so as to adjust to the requirements of the new industrial era. It was at the beginning of the 20th century, back in 1905, when the Belgrade Higher School had been raised to the level of University. Industrial revolution set its own quality requirements expected from the ones to be employed: efficiency, uniformity, standardization – all compliant with Taylor’s view of the industrial division of labour, which demanded specialisation and routine. Business operation of the industrial era was led by hierarchy, and the task of universities was to instil the students with knowledge about hierarchy and vertical system of governance that depended on specialisation, expertise and correct metrics which was dictated by the industrial division of labour. All these, when collected, should have ensured success.



Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, we need a new revolution, that would modernize universities and prepare the graduates for a different work environment. The research conducted among the employers indicates that even in the most developed countries, the universities no longer equip the students to respond to the new, changed requirements the contemporary jobs are placing. In developed countries, it is estimated that a student who acquires a university degree nowadays will change his career 4 to 6 times. So what the universities are doing is the following – they are preparing the students for the career path that is going to be linear, final, specialized and predictable. It turns out that students are prepared to be the experts in the fields that are going to become obsolete.

As I previously said, I spent five years in the United Kingdom, the country which represents the educational super force. Among 10 best-ranked world universities, apart from eight American, there are two British universities – Cambridge and Oxford. There are several UK universities in the list of 30 highest-ranked: UCL is 21st on the list and Imperial College is 24th. The remaining universities from the list are all American; there is only one from Switzerland, two from Japan and one from Canada. However, the investigations conducted in Britain claim that their students have excellent marks on the exams, but lack certain knowledge and skills necessary for the 21st century jobs: understanding human diversity in global context, skills in communication, cooperation, analytical judging, networking, ability to synthesize information based on a wide spectrum of facts. I would add one more thing here – in Britain, but to the greater extent in underdeveloped countries such as Serbia, many graduates do not know how to prepare their curriculum vitae or how to present their personal traits or talents at job interviews.

The Internet significantly changed the job structure in the 21st century, just in the same way as it was done by the conveyor belt in the factories at the beginning of the 20th century. Today, global life does not have vertical hierarchy, but turns into a horizontal plane. Certainly, that does not mean that everybody is equal, but it does mean that the standardization brought by the industrial revolution is slowly disappearing under the flows of information brought by the internet and the network. No manager can achieve control over how and when information flows. That also refers to the media, publishers, professors - information runs freely over the network.

Such circumstances have an enormous influence on how we work and communicate, what kind of attitude we assume as citizens (please remember the twitter ban in Turkey or internet censorship in North Korea), the way how we are organized or disorganized. The old division of labour faces constant challenges.

The universities of the 21st century should equip the students with the new skills mandatory for the information era – interpersonal, synthesizing, organization and communication skills. That is exactly the reason why study programs are becoming multidisciplinary, linking socio-humanistic and natural sciences, qualitative with quantitative studying, whereas post-graduation level combines research and professional master studies. Creation of good, modern syllabi requires deep theoretical knowledge and historic deliberation, joined with practical experience, managerial skills and new forms of collaborative online writing and presentation.

Earning this modern degree does not automatically mean that all the problems will be solved, they won't – but the graduates will be qualified to face the job crisis and flexibly respond to the emerging problems; they will be ready to switch to the new, today maybe non-existent jobs.

Serbia is entering a decisive phase of its positioning as a state in the 21st century. Having commenced accession talks with the EU and its member states in 2014, Serbia has a chance



to finalize these talks by the end of this decade and possibly, or even probably, become a full member of the European Union in the 2030s. The mere accession talks will change the conditions we live in: the candidate country is expected to implement *acquis communautaire* into its legal system and to adjust the functioning of society and make it compliant with the EU. Serbia is facing a serious task – not only to dramatically increase the portion of the higher educated – as with one third of the population having completed only primary school it is doomed to experience failure in any field – but to adjust the knowledge and skills gained on tertiary education with the radically changed world into which we are embarking. Your professors are fully aware of this fact; and that is why your study plans and programs – as contemporary world would say, or *curricula* and *syllabi* as the Romans would put it – are changing and constantly adjusting to the new challenges. In the world of scientific revolution, many jobs for which you will apply upon graduation do not exist at this moment. That is why you have to accept the concept of life-long learning. Just imagine all the possibilities that will open for you by the free movement of labour force in the huge EU market. However that freedom bears its risk: a highly qualified person from some other member state may wish to get a job exactly in Serbia. Competition brings challenges, but doubtlessly raises quality and offers quite a distinct perspective from the one, I would say pretty *sombre*, we are surrounded by now.