YOUTH PROJECT ENGAGEMENT: THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

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Abstract: *This paper aims to investigate the role of academic institutional support in extracurricular activities among youth (18-24 years old) in the Republic of Serbia. The research has been conducted among 1638 high school and university students. Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney tests were used to analyze differences between groups. Key research results indicate that extracurricular activities such as student project engagement and participation in student organization plays crucial roles in students' life. Students who participate more in projects perceive higher levels of educational support compared to their counterparts. The research results could be useful to create adequate policy recommendation and programs among higher institutions in Serbia.*

Keywords*: youth, project, higher education institution, support*

1. INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education play an important role in society, because they should provide support programs to young people through continuous youth engagement. Effective student services help young people to focus their energy to the right curricular and extracurricular activities. Proactive systems in higher education should anticipate the future needs of the labor market and the expectations of young people to create educational curricula and programs of extracurricular activities. Such programs should certainly include student projects, participation in student organizations, participation in debates, solving case studies, participation in different types of student competitions. As it was said in the movie "*Field of dreams*" the main idea comes from sentence "*If you build, they will come"*. The key idea in education should support system development that will help students to achieve their full potentials.

Particularly during the transition from secondary schools to universities, dedicated onboarding educational programs should be established to support young individuals effectively. Providing clear communication of requirements towards first-year students contributes to a lower degree of dropout of young people as well as a better transition of young people to higher levels of study and inclusion in academic life (Mah & Ifenthaler, 2019). Penn-Edwards & Donnison (2011) emphasize the first week of their study because that's when they get resources, presentations and the most important instructions and materials, as well as tips for studying. Rubio et al. (2017) in their study analyzed resource disparities among first-generation students in higher education, to assess their experiences and obstacles. The key results show that education costs and lack of information about higher educational institution were important obstacles, while the majority received funding from family.

2. STUDENT EXTRACURRICULAR ENGAGEMENT

Extracurricular engagement is important for young adults, to gain their first experiences through involvement in projects, connect with others and have more fulfilling daily obligations. Bundick (2011) analyzed the connection between high school extracurriculars and positive youth development, with a focus on the personal meaningfulness of such engagement. The key research results indicate that participation in student leadership and volunteering was correlated with positive development.

Similar conclusion got the Martinez et al. (2016) in their research, how participation in numerous extracurricular activities (sports, clubs, and arts) and combinations thereof is linked to high school students' perceptions of school climate, finding that involvement in extracurriculars is associated with more positive perceptions, though the effects vary by activity type and combination, suggesting that extracurricular participation may contribute to fostering a positive school environment. Forneirs et al. (2015) emphasize that participants engaged in sports-related activities showed greater developmental effects and higher levels of school engagement. Also,

this research suggests that parents and adult mentors should encourage and endorse students' participation in a variety of extracurricular endeavors, including high school sports, to promote positive youth development.

Social relationships, including those with teachers, peers, and parents, have been consistently associated with students' life satisfaction, problem behaviors, and school bonding, underscoring the importance of interpersonal connections in enhancing overall well-being (Pham & Murray, 2015). Additionally, personal growth initiatives and intentional efforts toward academic success have been linked to higher levels of life satisfaction among university students (Noor et al., 2020). Bjelica & Jovanović (2016) found that extracurricular among students influence their life satisfaction, and higher education institution should promote wellbeing programs for youth.

3. INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Paek et al. (2021) suggests enhancing undergraduate Computer Science students' GPA with an Innovation, Competency, and Experience score, utilizing a web-based platform called RadGrad to encourage and reward involvement in extracurricular activities, showcasing the potential value of a holistic assessment for promoting career-relevant experiences alongside traditional coursework. Institutions can effectively support students in their extracurricular activities by providing mentorship programs, implementing evaluation and incentives systems, and offering career advising programs to mitigate potential negative impacts on academic performance (Almasry et al., 2017). Additionally, collaboration with student organizations and stakeholders can simplify and identify student engagement in relevant activities promoting leadership development (Janke et al., 2016).

Enriching the student experience and promoting overall success can be achieved by stimulating transferable skills through extracurricular programs and project engagement (Huffman et al., 2019). Furthermore, other research indicates a positive correlation between extracurricular activities and academic performance, recognized to reduced academic stress and enhanced learning productivity (Utomo et al., 2019). These activities provide avenues for talent cultivation, interest exploration, and unique qualities development, contributing to personal growth and academic success. However, effective management and organization of extracurricular activities by educational institutions is crucial for their successful implementation (Fitri & Setyowati, 2018).

4. METHODOLOGY

The research is supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia, within the project "Engagement in Academic Achievements and Extracurricular Activities as Predictors of Life Satisfaction among High-school and University Students - SHINE". The preparation of this study has been done by three institutions: Institute of Economic Sciences in Belgrade, University of Belgrade, Faculty of Organizational Sciences and Faculty of Law. This study aimed to investigate the influence of institutional support measures on youth in the Republic of Serbia, with a focus on their engagement in student projects. Participants in the research included high school and university students aged 15 to 24 residing in the Republic of Serbia. This study presents a segment of the extensive research findings, specifically focusing on the participation of young individuals in projects (Table 1). The data analysis was conducted using SPSS 29.0 software, utilizing Cross-tabulations to illustrate demographic findings across the levels of institutional support. Furthermore, the Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney tests were applied to determine any significant differences.

Table 1: Sample characteristics of engineering students

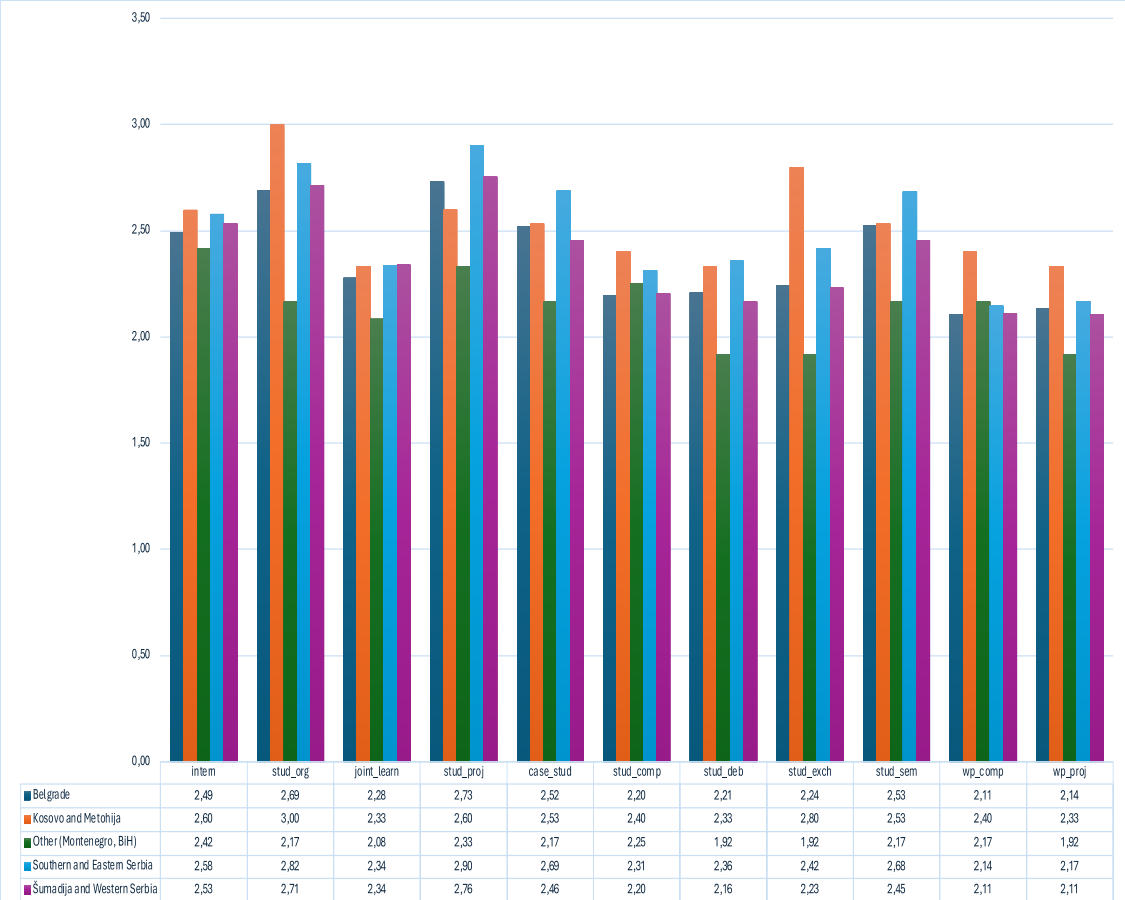
Characteristics	**n (%)**
Gender	
- Male	489 (29.9)
- Female	1149 (70.1)
Region of origin	
- Belgrade Region	913 (55.7)
- Vojvodina Region	100 (6.1)
- Šumadija and Western Serbia	425 (25.9)
- Southern and Eastern Serbia	173(10.6)
- Kosovo and Metohija	15 (0.9)
- Other (Montenegro, BiH)	12 (0.7)
Member of student organization	
- Yes	417 (25.5)
- No	1221 (74.5)
Student project engagement - stud_proj	

- 1 - I still haven't decided	304 (18.6)
- 2 - I don't plan to do it	241 (14.7)
- 3 - I plan to do it	634 (38.7)
- 4 - I did it or I'm currently doing it	459 (28.0)

5. RESEARCH RESULTS

In the research we have conducted analysis on youth engagement in different types of extracurriculars analyzing following factors: 1. Participation in business practice programs in companies - **internal**, 2. Participation in a student organization or group - **stud_org**; 3. Participation in a joint learning program or other formal program where groups of students attend one or more classes/courses together - **joint_learn**; 4. Participation in school or student projects - **stud_proj**; 5. Participation in solving business case studies - **case_stud**. 6. Participation in school or student academic competitions - **stud_comp**; 7. Participation in debates and public discussions - **stud_deb**; 8. Participation in the student exchange program - **stud_exch**; 9. Participation in specialized seminars, professional gatherings, and events - **stud_sem**; 10. Colaborative work with a member of the teaching staff on preparation for competitions. **wp_comp**; 11. Colaborative work with a member of the teaching staff on a research or commercial project - **wp_proj.** Scale from 1 to 4 has been used to assess the level of students' extracurricular engagement.

These extracurricular activities often show interconnections, while involvement in one may complement or enhance involvement in another. Figure 1 shows a wide-ranging summary of extracurricular activities about the students' regional origins. It is essential to note the diverse backgrounds from which students originate. The research findings suggest that the major engagement among youth lies in involvement in student organizations (stud_org) and participation in school or student projects.



	intern	stud_org	joint_learn	stud_proj	case_stud	stud_comp	stud_deb	stud_exch	stud_sem	wp_comp	wp_proj
Belgrade	2,49	2,69	2,28	2,73	2,52	2,20	2,21	2,24	2,53	2,11	2,14
Kosovo and Metohija	2,60	3,00	2,33	2,60	2,53	2,40	2,33	2,80	2,53	2,40	2,33
Other (Montenegro, BiH)	2,42	2,17	2,08	2,33	2,17	2,25	1,92	1,92	2,17	2,17	1,92
Southern and Eastern Serbia	2,58	2,82	2,34	2,90	2,69	2,31	2,36	2,42	2,68	2,14	2,17
Šumadija and Western Serbia	2,53	2,71	2,34	2,76	2,46	2,20	2,16	2,23	2,45	2,11	2,11

Figure 1: Participation of students in academic extracurricular activities based on their region of origin

Considering the significance of students' project engagement as one of the highly rated extracurricular activities, we have conducted an analysis focusing on youth engagement across various institutional support measures. Although project management is something that is taught mainly at university, there are also initiatives that have been implemented in elementary schools, where such initiatives have contributed to a more structured thinking among the younger population (Delle-Vergini et al., 2023). Students were supposed to evaluate to what extent the institution they attend emphasizes the following: a. Allocating a significant amount of time to study and academic work - **inst_learn**; b. Providing support to students to achieve academic

success - **inst_accsup**; c. Use of learning support services (reading room, library, laboratory) - **inst_serv**; d. Promoting interactions among students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, racial identities, religious affiliations, etc. **- inst_netw;** e. Provision of resources aimed at enhancing the overall well-being of students, encompassing recreational activities, healthcare provisions, and counseling services - **inst_welf;** f. Assistance in managing extracurricular commitments and obligations, including work and familial responsibilities - **inst_extracurr**; g. Participation in forums and gatherings dedicated to contemporary social, economic, and political issues - **inst_events.** The Likert scale have been used to evaluate the institutional support: 1- not at all, 2 - weak, 3 - solid, 4 - to a great extent, 5 - completely.

Overall, the mean values show that institutional support activities received varying levels of ratings, with inst_welf (3.04 ± 1.274) and inst_extracurr (2.97 ± 1.297) demonstrating the lowest scores among the surveyed activities (Table 2). Conversely, inst_serv obtained the highest rating (3.92 ± 1.132). Using the Kruskal Wallis test, differences were obtained for all parameters of institutional support. However, to determine the difference between the groups, the Mann Whitney test was used. A subsequent comparison of groups utilizing the Mann-Whitney test discovered a statistically significant difference between students who have not yet decided or do not intend to participate in projects, and those who either plan to participate or are currently engaged in such activities. It was observed that students already involved in projects exhibited the highest average assessment of institutional support.

Table 2: Analysis of educational institutional support in relation to student project engagement

stud_proj		inst_learn	inst_accsup	inst_serv	inst_netw	inst_welf	inst_extracurr	inst_events
1	Mean	3.29	3.21	3.71	2.96	2.82	2.62	3.08
	N	304	304	304	304	304	304	304
	Std. Deviation	1.149	1.206	1.224	1.312	1.317	1.317	1.294
2	Mean	3.34	3.22	3.60	3.00	2.85	2.70	3.13
	N	241	241	241	241	241	241	241
	Std. Deviation	1.073	1.075	1.228	1.173	1.216	1.101	1.146
3	Mean	3.72	3.65	4.06	3.41	3.17	3.10	3.50
	N	634	634	634	634	634	634	634
	Std. Deviation	.974	1.043	1.026	1.266	1.192	1.253	1.193
4	Mean	3.89	3.87	4.02	3.45	3.10	3.16	3.70
	N	459	459	459	459	459	459	459
	Std. Deviation	.990	1.090	1.105	1.367	1.354	1.370	1.235
Total	Mean	3.63	3.57	3.92	3.28	3.04	2.97	3.42
	N	1638	1638	1638	1638	1638	1638	1638
	Std. Deviation	1.054	1.123	1.132	1.307	1.274	1.297	1.240
Kruskal-Wallis H		77.681	89.785	38.335	45.902	21.989	50.307	64.038
df		3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Asymp. Sig.		**<.001**	**<.001**	**<.001**	**<.001**	**<.001**	**<.001**	**<.001**

6. CONCLUSION

Higher educational institutions in the Republic of Serbia play a significant role in shaping the overall course for the career path development of young people. This study is part of the research financed by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia in the field of Social Sciences and Humanities Program, Ideas. To analyze new avenues, this research has the main goal of analyzing differences and needs for young people engaged in extracurricular activities. The main findings suggest that student project engagement and membership are the highest-rated activities among youngsters. Also, there is a notable difference in the perception of institutional support among those who are not engaged in projects and their counterparts. Students engaged in projects and other extracurriculars perceive a higher level of institutional support. The results of the study could be useful for policymakers and leaders of educational institutions.

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