

(UN)REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS? PERCEPTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN VOJVODINA

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Abstract

Future students' expectations of higher education, and the relevance of one's (un)realistic expectations for further academic success, are of growing importance in the context of contemporary needs for quality improvement in higher education. Research indicates that students' perceptions and expectations regarding studies and academic life can influence their academic success, satisfaction with studies, as well as impact their decision to leave university. The research presented in this paper aims to investigate high school students' expectations and perceptions regarding higher education and future studies. Participants were 1259 third and fourth-grade high school students planning to continue their education at universities. The paper presents qualitative and quantitative analyses of open-ended questions which were assorted in numerous categories, subjected to further statistical analysis. Results indicate that the majority of high school students hold the belief that academic studies require more effort and that the concept of academic studies, regarding the structure of lectures, greatly differs from the one in high schools. On the other hand, a surprisingly small number of high school students expect to gain advanced knowledge at the university and get better opportunities for employment after graduation. It has been concluded that there are significant statistical differences among high school students regarding their expectations, depending on their gender, age, type of high school they are attending, as well as their hometown. The results were discussed concerning their relevance for enabling an easier transition from high school to university, providing better adaptation to university life and preventing dropping out from university.

Key words: higher education, students' expectations, perceptions, freshman myth.

(НЕ)РЕАЛНА ОЧЕКИВАЊА? ПЕРЦЕПЦИЈЕ ВИСОКОГ ОБРАЗОВАЊА МЕЂУ УЧЕНИЦИМА СРЕДЊИХ ШКОЛА У ВОЈВОДИНИ

Апстракт

Проблематика очекивања будућих студената од високог образовања, као и могућег утицаја (не)реалних очекивања на наставак и успех током школовања – добијају све више на значају у контексту савремених потреба за унапређењем квалитета високог образовања. Истраживања указују на то да перцепције и очекивања која ученици имају од студија и академског живота могу утицати на њихову одлуку о одустајању и напуштању студија, као и на академски успех и задовољство студирањем. Циљ спроведеног истраживања јесте испитивање очекивања и перцепције ученика средњих школа о високом образовању и студирању. Узорак је укључивао 1259 ученика трећег и четвртог разреда гимназија и средњих стручних школа који планирају да наставе школовање. У раду је приказана квалитативна и квантитативна анализа слободних одговора који су на основу садржаја распоређени у више категорија које су биле предмет даље статистичке обраде. Резултати указују на то да највећи број ученика од студирања очекује више труда и залагања, као и другачију организацију наставе у односу на средњу школу. Међутим, изненађујуће мали број ученика од високог образовања очекује виши ниво знања и боље запослење након завршених студија. Утврђено је и да постоје статистички значајне разлике међу ученицима у погледу очекивања у зависности од пола, узраста, врсте средње школе коју ученици похађају, као и места становања. Дискутовани су резултати са циљем разумевања и увиђања значаја феномена очекивања и разлика у перцепцијама будућих студената, ради успешније адаптације приликом транзиције из средње школе на факултет, као и превенције одустајања од студија.

Кључне речи: високо образовање, очекивања ученика, перцепција, бруцошки мит.

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, since the Bologna Declaration was signed in 1999, higher education has undergone substantial and formal transformations throughout Europe. However, despite criticisms of the Bologna Process (Amaral & Magalhães, 2004; Cuesta, 2010; Palfreyman, 2008; Pusztai & Szabó, 2008), the European Higher Education Area has been created and significant changes have been made to adjust and harmonize the higher education system (de Wit, 2007; Kehm, 2003; Teichler, 2004).

The Republic of Serbia has been participating in the Bologna Process since 2003, when continuous reforms in the field of higher education have been initiated. Development directions are foreseen, which are primarily aimed at ensuring the quality of education, as well as increasing the total number of higher educated individuals in the population. These goals are defined within the *Strategy for Education Development in Serbia 2020* (2012).

The policy of quality assurance in higher education and the advancement of pedagogical work with students also imply providing adequate support and assistance in enrolling in studies and transitioning

between high school and university education. However, although there are numerous studies in the world that have addressed these issues, there is very few such research in Serbia. This is why this research was conducted with the intention of answering the questions: what expectations high school students have from higher education, and what perceptions they have about studies and student life. The results of such research and their implications can directly contribute to the achievement of goals related to improving the quality of higher education, increasing the number of students within higher education, reducing the number of students who drop out and leave studies, the achievement of student-centred principles, as well as providing professional and pedagogical support to prospective students for easier adaptation to new study conditions.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EXPECTATIONS PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS HAVE FROM HIGHER EDUCATION

Research shows that students find that the transition from secondary to higher education is inherently stressful (Dyson & Rank, 2006; Gall, Evans & Bellerose, 2000; Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt & Alisat, 2000), challenging and complex (Crisp *et al.* 2009, Zirkel & Cantor, 1990), as well as a very emotional experience (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Jackson, Pancer, Hunsberger & Pratt, 2000; Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan & Majeski, 2004, Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). This is why numerous studies have been focusing on various aspects of the transition from secondary to higher education, such as: adaptation of students to a new education system during the first year of studies (Anrade, 2006; Church, 1982; Krause, Coates, 2008; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping & Todman, 2008), student experience throughout their studies (Mann, 2000), and students' perception of the quality of teaching and study conditions (Ginns, Prosser & Barrie, 2007; Hill, Lomas & MacGregor, 2003; Pavlina, Zorica & Pongrac, 2011). The results of these studies indicate that the transition between high school and higher education is a specific and emotionally charged experience which involves the adaptation and integration of young people to different aspects of studying and living in a new environment.

On the other hand, a comparatively smaller number of studies is focused on high school students' *perception* of the higher education, i.e. their *expectations* of university and student life (Crisp *et al.*, 2009), including prejudices, misconceptions, and stereotypes they create before entering the system. However, the results indicate that one of the factors influencing successful adaptation and success in their studies is "the discrepancy between the *expectations* of student life they have prior enrolling in studies and the *real life experience* they have once they enrol the studies" (Pancer *et al.*, 2000, p. 39). Literature defines this phenomenon using the phrase the *freshman myth*, the phrase Stern used to describe the

kind of “students’ naive, enthusiastic, and endless idealism” at the beginning of their studies (Stern, 1966, according Pancer *et al.*, 2000, p. 39). In other words, this phrase is used to describe the often unrealistically high expectations high school students have of their future university life (Surgenor, 2013). Accordingly, the purpose of this research was to determine how realistic the expectations the high school students have of their studies are and if their expectations can be characterized as the *freshman myth*.

How significant the expectations, perceptions, and a definition of a certain situation are can be illustrated by the fundamental theories defined in the first half of the twentieth century. It is important to mention *Thomas’ theorem*, set in 1928 by sociologist William Thomas, which emphasizes the fact that, if people define things as real, they become real in their consequences (Thomas & Thomas, 1928). In other words, in the domain of education, subjective impressions can be transferred to the educational situations and, in this sense, become a reality for the individual who created them. Additionally, the theory of *self-fulfilling prophecy*, by sociologist Robert Merton explains that the wrong definition of a situation drives the individual to behave in a new, different way, which then causes the original, wrong belief to become true, i.e. the “prophecy” to become “fulfilled” (Merton, 1948). In line with the abovementioned, the expectations that the future students have of studies and higher education, can significantly influence their behaviour, achievements, skills, and adaptation to new conditions of academic life.

On the same note, it is important to mention studies that addressed the issue of quitting and leaving studies, as a consequence of different individual and social factors. The results show that, in addition to the characteristics of the educational institution itself and the “institutional habitus” (Thomas, 2002), the influence of various individual, sociodemographic and socioeconomic characteristics of students is also significant for their decision to quit their studies (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975). At the same time, more recent studies show that factors such as social status (Devlin, 2013; Lehman, 2007; York & Thomas, 2003), quality of social networks, relationships and gaining friends (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005), gender differences (Drew & Work, 1998), as well as the approach to studying (Krause & Coates, 2008) significantly influence students’ perception and expectations of higher education. The conclusion is that certain personal and sociodemographic characteristics can influence the creation of future students’ expectations, which, later on, lead to (un)successful adaptation and adjustment to the new environment.

On the other hand, it is not justified to make a conclusion that all students have extremely idealistic expectations of studies and academic life. It has been found that there are significant variations between different types of students’ expectations of university prior to the beginning

of the studies (Zirkel & Cantor, 1990). This statement is supported by the results of a survey that classifies the expectations of prospective students prior to enrolment. The authors identified four types of expectations from universities and studies, namely: the optimistic, prepared, fearful, and complacent type (Jackson et al., 2000). The results indicate that about 34.5% of students had optimistic expectations, which were characterized as the freshman myth, as well as extremely positive expectations from their studies. The second group included the students that also had positive and optimistic expectations, but were aware of the fact that change entails certain challenges, adaptation, and personal development (about 24.8%). The third group included the students that felt fear and anxiety when thinking about studying (13.6%), while around 27.1% were classified in the fourth group, because they had low expectations from university life, and were marked as complacent (Jackson et al., 2000). The same study found that those students that felt scared and were experiencing greater stress, had a harder time adapting to the new environment and situation compared to other three groups of students, especially those characterized as prepared.

Looking at the results and the number of studies that were carried out with the aim of determining the perception and expectations of future students, the importance of examining these phenomena, as an aspect of improving the quality of education at universities, was pointed out. As a result of these findings, many universities in the world have established freshmen support centers, peer mentoring programs, created special programs and provided various types of education; the latter one, being organized in order to introduce the system of higher education to the high school students, as well as other forms of pedagogical work and assistance to prospective students.

METHOD

Topic and the purpose of the research. The results of theoretical and empirical foreign studies indicate to what extent (un)realistic expectations can influence the very studying process, and the decision whether to continue or drop out of studies (Pancer et al., 2000; Pervin, 1966). Taking this into account, the purpose of the research is to examine the prospective students' expectations and perceptions of higher education, as well as to determine if their expectations and perceptions are influenced by the socio-demographic factors. This research objective was operationalized into specific research questions in order to: (1) determine students' opinions concerning the differences between high school and higher education; (2) examine the extent to which high school students in Vojvodina have realistic expectations of their studies; (3) determine which type of expectations is the most prevalent among students; (4) identify which socio-demographic characteristics influence students' perceptions and expectations

of studies. The importance of such findings is reflected in the ability to create different, more adequate and individualized systems of professional and pedagogical support for prospective students.

Research procedure. The survey was conducted during April and May of 2017 with high school students as participants. The students had to fill in the questionnaire during their regular classes in their high schools, with the subject teachers, and/or researcher, a pedagogist and a psychologist present. The structure of the questionnaire was explained to them in great detail, as well as the fact that the research is anonymous and the results are only to be used for scientific purposes.

The *questionnaire* used in the research was designed to examine the students' awareness and expectations of higher education. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of questions about the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondent. The second part consisted of various claims and the students had to assert their truthfulness. Lastly, the third part consisted of open-ended questions regarding students' expectations, perceived difference between high school and higher education, university students' right and obligations, as well as sources of information about the studies.

Data processing. For the purposes of the paper, the data specifically related to examining students' expectations was carefully selected, and a qualitative analysis of the answers to open-ended questions is presented. The integration of a quantitative and a qualitative analysis was used in the processing of the data, in order to overcome the limitations of each of the methods (Caracelli & Green, 1993). The first stage of the analysis consisted of the content analysis and classification of the participants' responses to open-ended questions; in the second stage, quantitative statistical methods were used to determine if there was a significant statistical difference in the frequency of certain answers/responses in different factor modalities. After classifying the responses and determining their frequency, using a z-test on equality of proportions in independent samples, it was determined whether there was an influence of sociodemographic characteristics on the perceptions and expectations of high school students about higher education. The analysis was conducted using the SPSS statistical software.

The sample consisted of 1259 high school students from the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina; these were third- (33.41%) and fourth-grade (66.59%) high school students that were planning to continue their education. An appropriate sample was used; it consisted of 520 (58.23%) grammar school students, while 41.74% of the students went to a vocational school. Vocational high schools included were medical high schools (8.62% of students), high schools of economics (18.59%), and technical high schools (14.56%). The participants were students of 24 different high schools in 12 different cities; 32.47% of which were in Novi Sad, which is also a university city. The sample consisted of 66.59% female and 40.34% male students.

RESULTS

Out of all 1259 students that participated in the survey, 893 high school students, or 70.93% of all the participants, answered the open-ended questions related to the perception of the difference between the secondary and higher education, and the expectations prospective students have. The answers to these questions were used as the sample, they were analysed, and are still subject to further qualitative and quantitative analysis. Once all the responses were collected, the first step was to do a detailed qualitative analysis and, based on the content, sort them into ten defined categories, some of which were categorized into more than one category. The categories defined based on the answers participants gave are given in Table 1, as well as the description and examples of keywords used by the participants, for each of the categories. Data showing frequencies of the answers is also given below (Table 1).

Table 1. Categories of high school students' answers to open-ended and their frequency

Category	Description (keywords in answers)	Frequency of an answer
K1	Higher level of education Higher level of education, a more significant diploma, higher rank.	60 6,72%
K2	Better employment Better paid job, working in one's field, higher chances of getting employed, better positions and better workplaces.	59 6,61%
K3	Organization of teaching and studies Taking exams, different grading system, attendance in classes not mandatory, teachers have less control, different teacher-student relationship.	256 28,67%
K4	Greater commitment and seriousness Quantity and difficulty of learning content, scope of knowledge, more studying and more responsibilities, more serious approach to work, high school is easier.	319 35,72%
K5	Expertise and focus Expertise, choosing studies and subjects based on interests, practical knowledge in a different subject-areas, more focused on a subject field than high school.	145 16,24%
K6	Greater responsibility and independence Separating from one's parents, sole responsibility for studying and orienting in the new environment, one self's organization of studying, greater responsibility and independence.	128 14,33%
K7	Greater flexibility The possibility of not attending the classes, more freedom in choosing the subjects, more free time, choosing subjects and areas based on interests, the lifestyle, greater possibility of choice and organization.	113 12,65%
K8	Finances Studying is more expensive, costs, it is important to be a budget-financed student.	28 3,14%
K9	I don't know I don't know, I don't have any information, I'm not familiar with this.	32 3,58%
K10	Other Personal development, spending time with friends, student life, studying is better and more interesting, greater difference, high school is mandatory.	92 10,30%

The analysis of the results revealed that the most frequent students' responses relate to the category of *greater commitment and seriousness in work* during studies (35.72%). Additionally, a comparatively significant number of students (28.67%) lists *organization of teaching and studies* as a key difference. On the other hand, a surprisingly small number of high school students (3.14%) points out a difference in *costs* in high school compared to costs of higher education, as well as *better paid job* (6.61%) and a *higher level of education*, i.e. expectations related to a higher scope of knowledge (6.72%).

For a more detailed understanding of the data, such as whether the sociodemographic and personal characteristics of the participants (gender, age, type of school, and a place of residence) influence the expectations and perceptions of the students, additional analysis was included. Each of these factors had two modalities.

Table 2. Category frequencies based on a gender

Category	M	F	z-value (p-value)
Higher level of education	5.88%	7.39%	-0.876 (0.386)
Better employment	5.04%	7.77%	-1.598 (0.111)
Organization of teaching and studies	24.37%	31.44%	-2.284 (0.022)*
Greater commitment and seriousness	34.17%	36.74%	-0.783 (0.434)
Expertise and focus	14.85%	17.23%	-0.941 (0.347)
Greater responsibility and independence	9.52%	17.61%	-3.368 (0.001)**
Greater flexibility	12.61%	12.69%	-0.036 (0.972)
Finances	2.80%	3.41%	-0.509 (0.611)

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, statistical significance

The results indicate there were statistically significant differences in individual response categories when it comes to expectations of higher education, depending on the gender of the participants. Namely, more often, it was the female students who pointed out they were expecting a *different organization of teaching and studies* (31.44% girls, compared to 24.37% boys). Also, the biggest difference between male and female students appeared in the answers related to *greater responsibility and independence*. It was found that 17.61% of the female students emphasized this difference as the most significant one, compared to only 9.52% male students who did the same. The most frequent answer was the same for both genders, *greater commitment and seriousness*.

Table 3. The frequency of a category of the answer based on the class level

Category	Third grade	Fourth grade	z-value (p-value)
Higher level of education	5.70%	7.24%	-0.866 (0.385)
Better employment	9.06%	5.39%	2.080 (0.038)*
Organization of teaching and studies	33.56%	26.26%	2.273 (0.023)*
Greater commitment and seriousness	38.26%	34.34%	1.153 (0.249)
Expertise and focus	15.77%	16.50%	-0.302 (0.763)
Greater responsibility and independence	9.40%	16.84%	-2.989 (0.003)**
Greater flexibility	9.73%	14.14%	-1.868 (0.062)
Finances	3.36%	3.03%	0.267 (0.790)

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, statistical significance

The results obtained indicate that younger students, i.e. third-grade students more frequently point out the *organization of teaching and studies* as the biggest difference (every third participant – 33.56%), compared to every fourth fourth-grade student (26.26%). Third-grade students emphasized the answer *better employment* more often than fourth-grade students. However, the fourth-grade students indicated *greater responsibility and independence* as a key difference (16.84%) more often than third-grade students (9.40%). The most frequent answer for both age groups was *greater commitment and seriousness*.

Table 4. The frequency of a category of the answer based on a type of school

Category	Grammar school	Vocational school	z-value (p-value)
Higher level of education	5.77%	8.04%	-1.334 (0.182)
Better employment	5.77%	7.77%	-1.187 (0.235)
Organization of teaching and studies	28.85%	28.42%	0.140 (0.889)
Greater commitment and seriousness	34.42%	37.53%	-0.957 (0.339)
Expertise and focus	20.19%	10.72%	3.785 (0.000)**
Greater responsibility and independence	13.85%	15.01%	-0.488 (0.626)
Greater flexibility	15.19%	9.12%	2.691 (0.007)**
Finances	2.50%	4.02%	-1.286 (0.197)

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, statistical significance

The proportionality test in independent samples found there are statistically significant differences between students of grammar schools and vocational schools. Every fifth grammar school student (20.19%) expects bigger *expertise and focus* on a certain field at the faculty, while only every tenth vocational school student pointed out this difference (10.72%). A statistically significant difference was also found in the fact that more grammar school students (15.19%) pointed out *greater flexibility* than vocational school students (9.12%) as a significant difference between high school and college.

Table 5. The frequency of a category of the answer based on a place of residence

Category	Novi Sad	Outside Novi Sad	z-value (p-value)
Higher level of education	4.83%	7.63%	-1.565 (0.118)
Better employment	6.90%	6.47%	0.242 (0.809)
Organization of teaching and studies	33.10%	26.53%	2.033 (0.042)*
Greater commitment and seriousness	31.03%	37.98%	-2.030 (0.042)*
Expertise and focus	17.93%	15.42%	0.952 (0.341)
Greater responsibility and independence	15.17%	13.93%	0.495 (0.620)
Greater flexibility	21.03%	8.62%	5.224 (0.000)**
Finances	1.38%	3.98%	-2.088 (0.037)*

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, statistical significance

Finally, when it comes to expectations of higher education based on a place of residence of the participants, the results indicate that there are statistically significant differences in certain categories of responses. Students that attend high schools in Novi Sad expected *different organization of teaching and studies* more often (33.10%), while students attending schools outside of Novi Sad expected *greater commitment and seriousness*. A statistically significant difference was also found when it came to *finances*, with students outside of Novi Sad highlighting the question of finances as a difference between secondary and higher education. However, the biggest difference was observed when it came to the responses related to *greater flexibility*. Every fifth high school student attending schools in Novi Sad pointed out this aspect as significant (21.03%), compared to every eleventh student attending schools outside of Novi Sad (8.62%). All of the information above is extremely instructive when it comes to the adequate organization of studies and quality of classes.

DISCUSSION

Using a content analysis of the responses given, it was found that the highest percentage of high school students expect *greater commitment and seriousness* during their studies (35.72%), and that they stressed *the organization of teaching and study* (28.67%) as a key difference. This data indicates that more than a third of the participants expect more work and commitment from their studies, as well as a more serious approach to learning compared to high school. Also, the most common answers students gave emphasized the perception of the differences in the way of acquiring education, namely: passing exams, the existence of exam terms, a different grading system, the organization of lectures, etc. Such expectations, which relate to the organization of teaching and commitment

and seriousness in learning during their studies, can be characterized as realistic.

A slightly smaller percentage of high school students (16.24%) expected *greater expertise and focus* (which is especially characteristic of grammar school students), *greater responsibility and independence* (14.33%), as well as *greater flexibility* (12.65%). These responses indicate that the expectations high school students have are focused more towards their greater independence and autonomy during the studies, as well as self-responsibility for their actions and education. This is, in the first place, reflected in their choice of the study program, more freedom with respect to attending classes (they believe it is not mandatory for students to attend the classes, they do not have to justify their absence), as well as greater flexibility when it comes to organizing their personal time and studying. Expectations of these students could be characterized as optimistic. A ten-year-long, longitudinal study conducted in Australia found similar results; it was determined that first-year students make strategic decisions about balancing the time for social activities and studying, and that time that students are willing to spend in lectures decreases (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005).

On the other hand, a very small percentage of high school students (3.14%) singled out *finances* and study costs as a significant difference. Additionally, it is surprising that only 6.72% of students expect *higher level of education* and greater qualifications, and that an equally small percentage (6.61%) expect that they will, upon graduation, have a better *chance of getting a better job*, which is paid more. Data shows that high school students are informed about the organization of lectures, but not so much about other aspects of studying, such as student obligations, the importance of attendance at lectures, costs of studying, flexibility, as well as gaining professional qualifications. Accordingly, the implications of similar research are primarily focused on the importance of informing prospective students, as a predictor for a successful approach to studying and engagement during their studies (Crisp et al., 2009), and, in some cases, more effective completion of studies (Londgen, 2006).

The obtained results can be interpreted on the basis of the mentioned similar research, in which the prospective students' expectations were categorized into four types, namely: optimistic, prepared, fearful and complacent type (Jackson et al., 2000). The results of our study indicate that high school students have mostly realistic, as well as optimistic expectations of higher education. The expectations of the highest percentage of students can be characterized as *prepared*; because, even though they are positive, they still reflect a certain amount of caution and need to adapt to a new situation. The next group of high school students are those whose expectations can be characterized as *optimistic*, since they have markedly positive expectations of studies, which is defined as the freshman myth

(Pancer et al., 2000; Surgenor, 2013). The smallest percentage of high school students is classified as the *complacent* type, whose answers were categorized as *other*. They have relatively low expectations of higher education and find studying more interesting in terms of socializing, and the dynamic student life.

When it comes to the influence of sociodemographic and individual characteristics of the participants, it was confirmed that each of the assumed variables has a significant influence on the prospective students' expectations. In the first place, the results indicate that the expectations differ when it comes to the gender of the participants. The expectations of the female high school students are much more focused on the fact that studying implies more responsibility, independence and seriousness in learning, as well as different obligations, compared to young men. Such results are in line with other research findings that also highlighted gender differences in the perception of academic responsibilities and success. Specifically, pioneering research in this field has confirmed the gender influence on the perception and expectations of studies (Dole, 1970; Herr, 1971). More recent research also confirmed gender differences in the perception of studies (Ballo, Pauli & Worrell, 2015) and showed that the female participants have a more serious approach to studying, expecting to put more effort and work into it in order to get a higher grade (Lammers, Kiesler, Curren, Cours & Connett, 2005), as well as to spend more time in lectures (Drew & Work, 1998).

The results indicate that the students' age influences the expectations and that there are statistically significant differences between the third and fourth grade students. Younger high school students point out the differences and expectations that are classified in the *organization of teaching and studies* and *better employment* more often than older students. On the other hand, fourth year students expect *greater responsibility* and *independence* during their studies, compared to younger students. The need for autonomy and independence as one of life goals, is specifically expressed with students transitioning from high school to the faculty; the research show that the independence and identity are traditionally considered as the most significant normative goals of this age group (Zirkel & Cantor, 1990: 174).

Interesting and important differences were also observed when it came to the type of the high school the students are attending; it was confirmed that grammar school students expect greater *expertise and focus*, more often than vocational school students, as well as *more flexibility* during the studies, compared to high school. These responses imply that grammar school students expect more opportunities to express their interests, as well as more autonomy and freedom of choice. Additionally, such a significant difference can be explained by comparing different plans and programs for these types of schools, as well as taking into account a high level of general knowledge acquired in grammar schools. This is why

grammar school students feel as if the enrolment in the studies is a possibility towards the chosen profession. Their responses mentioned they would be learning things they find interesting once they were at the faculty, the possibility of choosing one's own subjects, being able to focus on a certain area, and not study the content unrelated to their field.

Statistically significant differences were also found between the students that attend high schools in Novi Sad and the students that attend high schools outside of Novi Sad. The analysis was conducted under the assumption that students that attend high schools in Novi Sad, which is a university city, have more information available, due to the proximity to the university, and more intense contact with active students. The data indicate that the high school students attending schools in Novi Sad point out different *organization of teaching and studies* as their most common expectation, which indicates their greater informedness, as well as *greater flexibility*, which is where the biggest differences between these two groups were observed. However, the students attending high schools outside Novi Sad point out, more often, the question of *greater commitment and seriousness*, as well as the question of *finances*, since it is more likely they will study in a different city, where their cost of living is going to be significantly higher than that of those who studying in the same city. It is useful to compare these findings with the social factors, such as the socio-economic status and financial support which is proven to be significant in previous research (York & Thomas, 2003). It is suggested that students with low socio-economic status may not have the relevant cultural capital or familiar experience with universities on which to rely to help them decode discourses and respond to implicit expectations within them (Devlin, 2013: 941). Furthermore, students from lower socio-economic background were more likely to say they had difficulty comprehending material and adjusting to the university environment (James, Krause & Jenkins 2010).

When it comes to the limitations of this research, it is important to state that all participants were students of high schools on the territory of Vojvodina. Even though the educational system is uniform throughout Serbia, which applies to all plans and programs for all the high schools, it would still be difficult to make a conclusion about the expectations of all the high school students across the country. Furthermore, it would be useful to include other personal and socio-demographic variables, such as the social status, social networks, etc., of the participants in order to further explore the possible influence of those factors. Also, the limitation applies to the very nature of the draft since it is not possible, based on the results, to conclude how (un)realistic certain students' expectations are, unless their subsequent individual study experience is also established. This is why it would be important to use longitudinal draft in subsequent studies, which would allow the monitoring of the students' experience during their first study year, and even later on, determining whether their

original expectations aligned with their real study experience. Such research would provide insights into the process of the adaptation and success during the studies, as well as possible dropping out.

Despite its limitations, this research is the first and, so far, an isolated and unique attempt to examine the expectations of high school students in Serbia and point out their importance in the context of improving the quality of higher education, as well as providing the best study conditions for each individual.

CONCLUSION

Examining the perception and expectations high school students have of higher education is a very significant research question in the context of improving the quality of education, as well as providing the pedagogical and academic support to new students. There are numerous foreign studies that deal with questions such as high school students' expectations and perceptions, the discrepancy between the idealized picture of university life and the real life experience during the studies, as well as emotions and successful adaptation to the student life and new way of education. However, there is a significantly small number of studies that deals with these questions in Serbia, and there are still no programs, information systems, educational workshops, manuals, etc, which provide relevant information on what exactly it means to study. Because of this, most frequently, the students get information from their friends (56.95%) and via the Internet (52.50%), as our research confirmed. A much smaller percentage of students seek and obtain relevant information at the very faculty (13.66%), and in their high schools (15.01%).

The results of our study indicate that high school students have somewhat realistic expectations of higher education, but that there is a high percentage of those that have very optimistic, unreal expectations, characterized as the *freshman myth*, which can have a significant effect on their academic success. The significance of these finding is reflected in the implications for creating educational programs and systematic support for high school students which plan to continue their education. Additionally, the results indicate that personal and sociodemographic characteristics influence the perception of higher education, as well as expectations of studies. Different expectations of prospective male and female students, third and fourth (final) grade students, students coming from grammar or vocational schools, and students living in a university city or not were determined.

It is important to recognize that the transition from high school to university studies represents a particularly challenging period (Leese, 2010; Lowe & Cook, 2003), and therefore deserves a significant scientific, as well as professional attention. Prestigious universities around the world

organize special programs to facilitate easier adaptations for new students (Crisp et al., 2009), and recognize that the students' lack of preparedness for academic life is one of the factors that can influence their disorientation, poor performance and even dropping out (Londgen, 2006; Thomas, 2002). In order to achieve the goals set, and increase the number of highly educated in the society, it is necessary to provide students with easier adaptation to the new conditions, orientation in the new environment, and provide special support for their academic, emotional, and social development and adjustment. However, for this to be feasible, it is necessary to examine and understand the expectations, beliefs and preconceptions young people have when enrolling at university faculties.

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(НЕ)РЕАЛНА ОЧЕКИВАЊА? ПЕРЦЕПЦИЈЕ ВИСОКОГ ОБРАЗОВАЊА МЕЂУ УЧЕНИЦИМА СРЕДЊИХ ШКОЛА У ВОЈВОДИНИ

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Резиме

У контексту континуиране реформе високог образовања и циљева унапређења квалитета наставе и педагошког рада са студентима, проблематика и значај (не)реалних очекивања будућих студената од високог образовања, као и могући утицај ових очекивања на наставак и успех током школовања – постају све актуелнији. Истраживања указују на то да очекивања која ученици имају од студија и академског живота могу утицати на одлуку о одустајању и напуштању студија, као и на успех током студија (Jackson et al., 2000; Pancer et al., 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). Међутим, иако у свету постоје бројна истраживања која су се бавила овим питањима, таквих истраживања је изузетно мало у Србији. Из тог разлога, спроведено је истраживање са циљем да се испита перцепција ученика средње школе о високом образовању и да се утврде њихова стварна очекивања од студирања и од новог академског окружења. Истраживање је спроведено на узорку од 1259 ученика трећег и четвртог разреда гимназија и средњих стручних средњих школа, оних који су се изјаснили да планирају наставак образовања. У овом раду, спроведена је квалитативна и квантитативна анализа одговора на питања отвореног типа која су се односила на очекивања и перцепцију ученика о високом образовању. Квалитативном анализом су сви отворени одговори на основу садржаја распоређени у десет дефинисаних категорија, које су биле предмет даље статистичке обраде.

Резултати указују на то да највећи проценат ученика има очекивања која се могу сврстати у категорију веће залагање и озбиљност у раду током студија (35,2%) и категорију другачије организације наставе и студија (28,67%). Нешто мањи проценат ученика (16,24%) очекује већу усмереност и стручно знање (што је посебно карактеристично за ученике гимназије), већу одговорност и самосталност (14,33%, што је посебно изражено код девојака), као и већу флексибилност (12,65%). С друге стране, упадљиво мали проценат средњошколаца (3,14%) очекује веће трошкове студирања у односу на средњу школу. Такође, изненађујуће је да само 6,72% ученика очекује виши ниво образовања и да једнако мали проценат (6,61%) очекује да ће након завршених студија имати шансе за бољи посао. Затим, утврђено је да постоје статистички значајне разлике у зависности од личних и социодемографских карактеристика испитаника и да оне утичу на перцепцију високог образовања, као и очекивања од студија. Такве резултате требало би имати у виду приликом педагошког рада и осмишљавања подршке студентима, посебно када су у питању родне разлике, јер девојке очекују више одговорности и другачију организацију студија у односу на мушкарце. Такође, ученици гимназија очекују више стручног и усмереног знања, старији ученици очекују више самосталности и флексибилности, док ученици ван Новог Сада очекују да уложе више труда, као и знатно скупље студирање.

Значај резултата овог истраживања огледа се у импликацијама за стварање едукативних програма и система подршке ученицима средњих школа који планирају да наставе школовање како би се олакшала транзиција и адаптација на нове услове школовања и живота. Тиме би се директно допринело остварењу циљева који се односе на повећање броја високообразованих, смањење броја студената који одустају и напуштају студије, остварењу принципа студент у центру учења, као и обезбеђивању стручне и педагошке подршке будућим студентима. Најзад, ово истраживање упућује на значај феномена као што су перцепције, предрасуде, предубеђења и (не)реална очекивања када је реч о будућем искуству младих особа на универзитетима.