TOO EARLY OR TOO LATE —
MASTER PROFESSIONAL IN SERBIA

ABSTRACT. The harmonization of modes of study and assessment within the European educational space has long since become an integral part of policy and practice of a large number of countries, including those which have started negotiations for joining the European Union, among which is Serbia. The most important transformation in this sense has been sustained by the system of higher education, with its main levers of faculties and higher vocational schools. Faculties, which cannot exist independently, but only under the auspices of universities, were given the right to organize and conduct three circles of studies. On the other hand, higher vocational schools, which can exist independently, were given the right to organize only two circles of studies. Thus, they were not given the right to organize and conduct doctoral studies. As for the second circle of higher education, faculties were given the right to organize and conduct master and specialized studies, whereas the vocational schools were given the right only to the specialized studies. Nonetheless, ten years after the introduction of the «Bologna mechanism», the decision has been made to grant higher vocational schools the right to conduct master degree studies, however specific, as they would need to be closely related to practice. It turned out, nevertheless, that all the conditions were not yet existent and ripe for such a move, as a consequence of which the public opinion has become divided and the whole process ceased. In this paper, we explain the basic controversies, as well as the pros and cons of such a decision. We also analyze the sensitive and contentious issues surrounding the introduction of the master of vocational studies and provide suggestions as to what still needs to be closely defined and adjusted in that regard.

KEY WORDS: Master of Applied Sciences; Bologna Process of Higher Education, Republic of Serbia;
Key findings

Introduction. The Law on Higher Education recently gave the right to vocational high schools in Serbia to introduce a master program and grant the title of Master Professional to their students. The framework deadline laid down at the National Strategy for Education has been outrun by some influential lobbies in and around the industry of education. Instead by the end of 2020, the breakthrough was made fifteen months ago. Such novelty raised many questions, among others — did it occur too early or too late?

Not only the experts and common people, but the notable authorities and officials (as the Ministry of Education and the National Counsel of Higher Education are) took the opposing views on the issue. Above that, current and future students found themselves in the bed of nails, especially those who already attended vocational studies. Confusion was reinforced by the fact that Germany, as the key country of the European Union, at the same time maintained the essence of its traditional system of education and even developed the vocational doctoral studies by research? How than to make the Serbian higher education’s face more European looking and improve its quality?. That is the topic which we consider in out article.

Purpose. This paper aims to point out some problems which follow the process of Serbian higher education adjustment to the principles proclaimed by the so-called Bologna Declaration, as the corner stone for harmonization of the educational environment in Europe and accommodation of the methods for assessment and evaluation in this area. Without denying that Serbia has made significant progress on the rout, it would be shortsighted one to neglect that some elements and segments were introduced in a half-cocked, largely formalistic way, without sufficient consideration and preparation. One of these sensitive questions is the introduction of the Master of Professional Studies through the system of the vocational higher education in Serbia. In this regard, we will try to suggest how to overcome differences, or at least to mitigate the consequences of such incongruence.

Results. Changes in the economy, science, technology and society are constant, but mainly unpredictable. They arouse new interests and create the most diverse needs. The education system has at least to adjust to such changes, if can’t meet or lead them. It is undisputed that the education system in Serbia has experienced gradual changes, especially during the period of overall transition. However, the socio-political and socio-economic shift in Serbia was to sharp in the last
two decades, so that the education system, as well as many other vital systems (not only social care, health insurance, child and family care, but also the judicial system and the security system) was enabled to meet pro-European proclamations and common people’s expectation. In spite of good intentions, a significant gap was produced between plans and reality, policy and practice, as well the strategy and its implementation. The field of education didn’t avoid the consequences of such development.

In 2003 Serbia (as part of the then FRY) joined the Bologna process on the harmonization of diplomas and the establishment of the European Higher Education Area. Based on that, a new Law on Education was introduce, as the first step in the implementation of the so-called Bologna education system.\textsuperscript{1} The external effect of these changes is that in Serbia mobility at all levels of education has been increased. Many new disciplines have been introduced with the intention to have them adapted to market needs, as market was supposed to assume the role of the state in the economy, as well as in shaping the further development, including the financing of social activities. The number of universities increased significantly, as well as the number of colleges and vocational high schools, primarily due to the introduction of private ownership in the sphere of education.

In certain segments Serbia even went ahead of itself, «running» faster than its capabilities would allow, in an effort to introduce — as soon as possible — something that in other countries had been created for decades. Therefore, the Law on Higher Education (passed in 2005) has been often amended and supplemented (in 2007, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015). All this has been performed with a clear intention to make up the face of domestic higher education so it could become a desirable bride in the European educational mirror.

Higher education in Serbia is divided into academic and vocational. Academic education is related to universities (consisting of several faculties or art academies), and vocational is related to vocational studies. In terms of education, a unified approach has prevailed, so curriculums of both sectors are divided into five areas (mathematical and natural sciences, social and humanity sciences, medical science, technical and technological sciences and the arts). The basic difference is made regarding the level of studies. Starting from 2005, academic higher education takes place on three levels, and professional on two levels. This means that high vocational schools

\textsuperscript{1} Ukraine joined the process in 2005, signing Bergen Communiqué, but only the enactment of the new Law on Higher Education in July 2014 created the conditions for the introduction of a three-stage system of higher education;
are not given the right to organize the third level studies — i.e. doctoral studies.

There remains, however, one more difference. Despite the «Bologna provenance» of education authorities in Serbia, the difference was made at the second level of higher education studies, too. The law makers of the 2005 Act had neither courage, nor probably any reason to unify the second level of studies between universities and higher vocational schools. The former have always been perceived as something positive, the latter have been burdened with remarks of illicit light mobility of students and considerable weaknesses of teachers. Universities were granted the right to organize master and specialist studies too (lasting one or two years), and vocational higher education is only allowed to organize one-year specialistic studies — i.e. not the master studies.

However, this caused dissatisfaction of both vocational higher schools, as well as of one part of the European educational administration, which was in a position to impose assessments on what individual signatories — states — have achieved, and where they have failed. Of course, they did not really take into account the difficult economic situation in Serbia, the radicalism of the changes brought by the so-called «Bologna process» of education, nor did they include the weaknesses that have for years burdened the vocational education in Serbia (satellite classes in remote areas, a large number of teachers without a doctorate, numerous evening schools, education with work, etc.). On the other hand, higher schools were eager to get their hands on the proclaimed «Bologna» platform rights to organize master vocational studies. After all, more students means more revenue, and they are not to be blamed for this.

Under this pressure, and riding on the wave of «Bologna educational climate» Serbia has in recent years made another big step forward. First, in late 2012 Serbia adopted the Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in Serbia until 2020, which gave the «green light» for master vocational studies. Further, Serbia adopted the Action Plan for implementation of the strategy, according to which the accreditation of professional master study should start in February 2015 and end in December 2017. Nevertheless, it was only with the amendment of the Law on Higher Education, in September 2014, that the basis for the formal introduction of the Master of Professional Studies was established.¹ Pursuant to this law, Serbia also adopted one part of supporting acts of significance for the

¹ "Official Gazette" of the Republic of Serbia, No. 99/2014;
preparation of documentation and assessment of compliance with the standards for accreditation of higher education institutions — Academy of vocational studies. Many vocational higher schools could hardly wait for this moment and had various applications ready to implement the master vocational education; they immediately applied for accreditation, and / or for obtaining approval for the establishment of the Academy of Professional Studies, as a group that brings together several schools from the same region.

Still, to this day, no Academy of vocational studies in Serbia has been accredited, and subsequently could not be registered in the registrar of legal entities. Likewise, no master program at any vocational higher school has been accredited, so the school are unable enroll master students. There is little chance that this will happen soon. Nevertheless, numerous higher vocational schools on there websites promote two-year master program of professional studies, or have had this printed in the information brochure, inviting students to enroll in the 2015/16 school year. It is only in footnote that one can find that the accreditation procedure is still in progress.  

Prospective students and their parents find themselves in deep wonder and doubt. There followed a serious polarization of attitudes between the educational authorities and vocational colleges. Of course, the public is divided, too. Representatives of the Ministry of Education did not expect that «higher schools» would jump at the chance to start enrolling students to master vocational studies, so they did everything they possibly could to slow down and delay this process. Most often they cite that according to the Development Strategy of Higher Education and the Strategy of implementation this courses should be introduced by the end of 2020 and that the state should act hastily in this. Furthermore, they point out a number of weaknesses in higher vocational schools, and this is the same thing that representatives of faculties have been doing, warning of inadequate capacities of vocational schools for carrying out this cycle of higher education.

Representatives of vocational schools have in turn responded through media offensive, but also by addressing institutions that are responsible for overseeing the implementation of the new system of higher education in the countries signatories of the Bologna

Declaration. There side is also advocated by the representatives of the Accreditation Commission, so the National Council for Higher Education supported the professional colleges’ request. They disregarded the requirements of the Development Strategy of Higher Education of Serbia that the basic prerequisite is to previously establish a model for inclusion of research programmes into vocational studies. Not a single document on how to organize, implement, verify and validate start the exploration of master students of vocational schools should implement has not been passed, nor has any single professional body discussed it; not a single vocational school has created such a mechanism as yet.

In the absence of regulation, it could happen that vocational schools, for example, present a cooperation agreement with some hairdressers’ as cooperation with industry, and reduce research project to an excel spreadsheet on the number of customers and the type of service provided. Similarly, a mere change of name of higher educational school into academy would lead to a new shuffle in this area. Master without college, a specialist without a profession. This is the reason why the Ministry of Education advised the National Council for Higher Education not to rush into things and to once again seriously entertain the problems that are already present or will break out.

The controversies that have arisen over the introduction of master vocational studies are essentially the result of rapid and radical change of the whole structure of education, without sufficient deliberation, preparation and creation of conditions for such a reversal. Frequent and partial amendments to the Law on Higher Education are the best example. In Serbia there is no important law, with critical social consequences, that has been this often «patched» and «repaired». The influence and interests of certain lobbies have left deep scars on higher education system in Serbia. It is evident that it was necessary to first pass a completely new Act with the participation of the entire academic and scientific public in Serbia, and not only of the government political representatives.

Regarding vocational colleges, the first thing to be re-thought is their name. One possibility is to unify the name, so faculties would be called — Academic scientific studies, and vocational schools — Academic applied studies. It would be closer to practice of most European countries, but also closer to Serbian public tan a too narrow «professional» name. More important still is to complete the changes.

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1 „Rat visokih škola i države“, dnevni list „Politika“, Beograd, 26.06.2015., dostupno na: http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Drustvo/ Rat-visokih-skola-i-drzave.sr.html ; (posećeno 10.02.2016);
to the classification of occupations, and to define and jobs in the status of master of professional studies and specialist at vocational studies. At this momento it is completely unclear where these masters would be employed and what jobs they would perform — whether, for example, in schools they should teach only the practical training, and in companies and public institutions should only be assigned to the task of practitioners, or something else. Diploma titles are also unclear. Is everyone going to have the same title, such as: Master of Professional Studies (MP-Master Professional), Master of applied skills (MAS-Master of Applied Skils), Master of Applied Science (MASc — Master of Applied Sciences, by Research), Master of Polytechnics (MPD -Polytechnic master’s degree), or any of the related abbreviations such as — MASc, MAppSc, MAplSc and M.A.Sc.), together with stating the scientific field?

According to the present state of things, each vocational school would in its own diploma name the acquired for professional master’s degree program organized. So, for example, there would be a Master of business economics (which sounds awkward in English: MBE-Master of Business Economy, in shortened version: MB-Master of Business and Master MP-Profesional). Of course, there are other names too, some of which might even sound comical. Originality and connection of the diploma title and the master program is something that is generally taken for granted, but lack of unification would cause diversity and inconsistency, which could only further trivialize this type of study, as well as the value of their diplomas.

Rules for the accreditation of professional master studies provided that the student who has completed specialized studies is immediately able to enroll in the second year of the master, with the obligation to pass differential exams. But if we know that this type of vocational studies is performed by teachers lacking the title of PhD, then in practice this negates the obligation that master vocational studies must be carried out only by PhDs. Also, so far there existed no requirement for students of specialized vocational studies to conduct practice in companies, and it is obligatory for students of applied master programme. Apparently, the direct passage from the specialist professional studies into the second year master of professional studies includes many doubts and controversies. Both might later, in practice, negatively affect the employer’s attitude towards the students who bring a degree of «applied master». This issue requires relevant professional discussion, because it is not a purely formal issue, but it concerns the basic terms of content and quality of the acquired knowledge of masters.
Let us not forget the issue of scientific vocation of future teachers of master professional studies. The standards prepared in this regard demand that classes are taught exclusively by teachers with PhD. This sounds rather nice, but is actually quite problematic. A very small number of teachers of vocational schools has any previous experience in companies. They mainly studied while teaching classes in their own or some similar school. On top of that, at higher schools, whether of general or vocational orientation, and regardless of whether state-owned or privately-owned, there has never existed the institute of teacher re-election. Further, there is the issue of whether or not to introduce a teaching assistant, assistant professor, associate professor and full professor of Applied Studies. Will they be equated with those same scientific positions at the universities? Who is to be re-elected to such a vocational teaching position — only those who have had practice in the economy? And if the teachers exit the industry and remain outside for a decade or longer, are they still able to implement new knowledge if they remain outside of profession for years? An even bigger problem is the lack of practical experience with those teachers who have spent entire careers only in the classroom. Further, due to the decline in economic activity in Serbia, reduction of the number of enterprises, disappearance of industrial and manufacturing giants, mass layoffs, the closure of shops and stores, as well as the growing number of unemployed — there remains a significant doubt where would both teachers and students be able to perform their practical work and acquire, control and improve their knowledge and skills.

The total number of vocational higher schools in Serbia is also unclear. In a public debate we often hear of 61 vocational colleges, out of which 48 are state-owned and 13 are privately owned. However, in a brochure for enrollment in the academic year 2015/16, published by the Committee on Accreditation and Quality Assurance, we have counted no less than 85 schools (including those without legal personality), and one of them states that accreditation was not renewed, and one claims to be accredited in 2007 (but does not say whether its program ceased to exist, since there is no confirmation on the accreditation renewal in 2012)

In addition to the above issues, there are many other questions too, that go beyond the subject of masters of professional studies. These issues are related to other important topics in this area, such as a large gap between the number of annual accredited slots new entries (on

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average about 60,000 a year) and the number of enrolled students (about 26,000 per year). The contradiction lies in the fact the number of those who acquire a diploma slowly becomes higher every year, while the number of unemployed with a diploma is rapidly growing. Currently, about 60,000 people with a diploma wait for a job at the «Employment Bureau». It is strange that most unemployed graduates come from the most popular faculties. In the first place, in both cases, are economists, then lawyers, classroom teachers, medical doctors and architects.¹ In addition, in Serbia on average some 700-800 students obtain PhD, and currently 118 doctors of science can not find a job, of whom 64 are women. Among the unemployed PhDs lead those of economic sciences — 21 person, of medical science — 8 persons and Agricultural Sciences — 7 persons. Next, perhaps even greater contrast is that despite all the proclamations about the need for education and employment of young people in Serbia today about 150 000 young people, aged between 15 and 24 years, are neither studying, nor working, nor are they involved in any socially useful activity.² The statistical books are yet to introduce such a category — the forgotten.

Amid all these troubles and concerns, in Serbia in mid-2016 the 26th Annual Conference of the European Association of higher vocational education (EURASHE) will be held. The intention of Serbia is to show that through these schools a cooperation of education and the economy can be realized; further, this should in practice implement partnership between public and private sector and increase employment opportunities for young people. Of course, the question remains whether such a concept can contribute to increasing participation of the population with higher education in the structure of the Serbian population and will this contribute to the employment of young people with a degree. The intention is rather ambitious, just as is the desire to achieve results in a relatively short period of time. For something like that, it turned out, it is not enough to pass new regulations, but we must create both the circumstances and facts on which the favorable outcome of all elements of the Bologna process depends.

**Conclusion**

The transition from the traditional system of higher education in Serbia (higher and high school, faculty, masters and doctorate) to the

² Statement by the president of the Belgrade Chamber of Commerce Marko Čadež, daily „Blic“, Belgrade, 10.02.2016, http://www.blic.rs/vesti/ekonomija/cadez-preduzetnistvo-zaposljavanje-mladih/q2v49e, (viewed 10.02.2016);
so-called Bologna system of education (which has three degrees — basic degree, master’s and doctoral programs) started pretty early and developed rapidly. In fact, the most has been done to change the very structure of education, whose main levers were frequent changes in the fundamental law on higher education in 2005. A part of these changes was insufficiently prepared, which became evident when some 15 months ago higher vocational schools were given the licence to introduce the master vocational studies. However, no accreditation has been approved as yet and chances is are it will not be approved any time soon. This put both the relevant ministry (which normally likes to show-off its Bologna-credentials) and several dozen senior vocational schools which have already promoted their master programs and initiated the establishment of the Academy of vocational studies, but also the more than six thousand students who have just completed basic vocational studies. Scientific and expert public is divided, and the interests of certain major players in the industry of education are strongly opposed. At this moment, this huge impasse is an important lesson for all of them. One of the most interesting lessons is that so fundamental an innovation should have been far better prepared, and its system implementation should commence only after the creation of the new law on higher education, which is of vital importance.

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ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ В СОВРЕМЕННОМ ОБЩЕСТВЕ

АННОТАЦИЯ. Современные глобализационные процессы выдвигают критерии переосмысления роли образования в направлении приобретения профессиональных компетенций, которые обеспечивают улучшение трудоустройства индивидов. И хотя формальное образование все больше приспосабливается к условиям рынка и тенденциям в экономике, под вопросом остается, насколько его результаты достаточны для успешной профессиональной деятельности. В качестве императива развития предлагается обучение на протяжении всей жизни: непрерывное неформальное и информальное образование, приобретаемое в процессе накопления профессионального опыта и сетевого взаимодействия с другими индивидами. Такой подход к образованию направлен на повышение эффективности экономики, занятости людей, что может способствовать увеличению чувства личного удовлетворения.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: компетентностный подход, образование, возможности трудоустройства.

EDUCATION IN THE MODERN COMMUNITY

ABSTRACT. Contemporary globalization processes set up criteria for redefining the role of education in the direction of acquiring professional competences that enable greater employability. Although formal education successfully continues to adapt to market conditions and economic trends, there is still the question to which extent its