

## STUDENT LIFE SATISFACTION THROUGH THE LENS OF ACADEMIC PARTICIPATION

Dragan Bjelica<sup>1</sup> Marko Mihic<sup>2</sup> Sonja Ivančević<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:** The article explores the topics of students' engagement in academic activities as well as students' life satisfaction. It discusses the importance of curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities and emphasizes their positive effects on students' academic performance, personal development, and social integration. The article also presents empirical data from the SHINE project involving Serbian students, with a focus on their participation in extracurricular activities and their life satisfaction. The findings reveal that students in Serbia consider these activities important for their education and future careers, as well as their personal and social development. Regarding students' life satisfaction, project findings show that students are mostly satisfied with their family relationships and mostly dissatisfied with their financial situation and recreational opportunities. These findings emphasize the significance of fostering supportive environments for students and suggest that increasing students' participation in different kinds of academic activities could improve their well-being, and their current and future success.

**Keywords:** engagement in academic activities, participation in academic activities, life satisfaction, students, extra-curricular activities

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Students' participation in academic activities has been one of the topics that has intrigued researchers for decades. Opinions among both students and academic staff remained divided on whether engagement in various educational activities contributes to academic success or, in contrast, acts as a distraction, hindering students from achieving their goals. Simultaneously, public perception regarding the role of educational institutions on one side, and the responsibility of students themselves for actively pursuing their desired academic outcomes on the other, have changed over time. These shifting perspectives have stimulated the rise of several distinct theories that paved the way for numerous studies examining different aspects of academic activities and their correlates. Another important topic for researchers examining educational and student-related matters has been students' life satisfaction. However, the studies examining the factors most significant to students' satisfaction with life have produced mixed results. They have shown that age, cultural factors, and other specific characteristics of the examined student populations play a major role in determining which areas and elements contribute the most to students' life satisfaction.

As both students' engagement in academic activities and students' life satisfaction have been under-examined regarding the population of students in Serbia, a project supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia, 7754305, *Engagement in Academic Achievements and Extracurricular Activities as Predictors of Life Satisfaction among High-school and University Students – SHINE* has been conducted. With this respect, the aim of this article is to present a literature review regarding both students' participation in academic activities and students' life satisfaction and present some of the most interesting empirical data regarding these two concepts, obtained through the project SHINE.

### 2. STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES

Academic activities encompass a broad spectrum of learning experiences, comprising structured learning based on curriculum [1], co-curricular learning activities that enhance the formal curriculum [2] and, finally, extra-curricular activities that are only indirectly tied to formal education but aim to create 'experiences that further the total development of the individual students' (p. 438)[3].

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, University of Belgrade – Faculty of Organizational Sciences, Jove Ilića 154, [dragan.bjelica@fon.bg.ac.rs](mailto:dragan.bjelica@fon.bg.ac.rs)

<sup>2</sup>Full Professor, University of Belgrade – Faculty of Organizational Sciences, Jove Ilića 154, [marko.mihic@fon.bg.ac.rs](mailto:marko.mihic@fon.bg.ac.rs)

<sup>3</sup>Junior Researcher, University of Belgrade – Faculty of Organizational Sciences, Jove Ilića 154, [sonja.ivancevic@fon.bg.ac.rs](mailto:sonja.ivancevic@fon.bg.ac.rs)

In most universities worldwide, students' participation in academic activities is not obligatory and not all students take advantage of them. Some students, for instance, choose to stay at home believing they will benefit more from learning in solitude and avoiding distractions. They may also feel that instead of participating in co-curricular or extra-curricular activities they should focus solely on academic work and exam preparation. Indeed, Kariyana et al. [4] observed that numerous stakeholders in the educational systems believe that co-curricular activities unnecessarily occupy academic time. Additionally, certain theoretical perspectives suggest that activities organized by educational institutions, particularly extra-curricular ones, divert students' attention from accomplishing their academic goals [3] or contribute only to achieving non-academic outcomes [3].

Nevertheless, research data show contrary results. Namely, the extensive investigations regarding students' participation in academic activities started in the 1980s, inspired by the groundbreaking studies of Robert Pace [5]. These studies postulate that students' active engagement and participation in academic activities are crucial for achieving the desired academic success [5], the proposition later confirmed by numerous research findings [6]. Moreover, two prominent theories explaining these relations originated from Pace's studies – Tinto's Student Integration Theory [7] and Austin's theory of Student Involvement [8].

Vincent Tinto's Student Integration Theory suggests that students who successfully integrate into the social as well as academic aspects of overall academic life have a higher probability of remaining in their chosen program and completing their degree [7]. The theory postulates that the positive relation between students' being involved and their academic achievement is linked to students feeling connected to their academic journey and their social surroundings within the university [7]. Indeed, the studies of Massi et al. [9] and Rienties et al. [10] have confirmed that students' social integration does represent a link between their engagement in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities and their academic success.

Alexander Austin's framework primarily examines how university students allocate their time. According to Austin, when students dedicate time and effort to their educational goals, engage in different academic activities, and establish connections with the academic staff, they have a greater chance to achieve desired educational outcomes [8]. A number of subsequent research have supported the idea that there is a significant link between students' engagement in these activities and their overall success in college, as demonstrated in studies [11] and [12].

On the other hand, there are studies indicating that the connection between student engagement in academic activities and their performance does not always have to be positive or significant and that it varies according to the activity type, and unique characteristics of the student groups being studied [13], [14]. Also, it is important to say that the consequences of students' engagement in academic activities have dominantly been examined concerning academic performance measured through students' GPA [14], [12], whereas its effects on subjective academic performance have been under-investigated. Additionally, these relations have mostly focused on students' engagement in co-curricular activities [15], [2] and extra-curricular activities [16], [17], whereas participation in strictly curricular activities lacks examination. Overall, it may be said that there is a wide range of under-examined relations regarding students' engagement in academic activities, including its effects on the prevailing issues related to students' well-being and mental health that have emerged in the last decades [18], [19], [20].

## 2.1. Academic Engagements of Serbian Students – Results of the Project SHINE

In order to examine engagements in academic activities of Serbian students as well as their life satisfaction, a project SHINE has been carried out. The project has produced numerous results presented in the monography *Mladi u Srbiji: obrazovni, ekonomski i socijalni aspekti* (title translation:

The Youth in Serbia: Educational, Economic, and Social Aspects) [21], some of which will be presented herein.

The survey included 1435 students from the Republic of Serbia. First and foremost, it is important to say that among all the examined students, 50.7% of them believe that their education provides practical experience and the opportunity to solve complex problems in real work contexts. Next, 58.1% of the total number of respondents believe that participating in extracurricular activities helps them enhance their knowledge. Concerning their motivation for participating in extracurricular activities, 16.3% of respondents report fun, 25.5% networking, and 26% improvement in practical skills.

Regarding membership in student organizations, the survey has shown that 25% of students are members of student organizations at the educational institution they attend and that such involvement provides them with an opportunity to participate in different trainings and workshops. Students who are not members of such organizations report a lack of time as well as insufficient information about the organizations as the reasons.

With respect to the effectiveness of their education, 69% of respondents believe they will find a job within three months after completing their education, and 22% of the examined students plan to start their own business, whereas 29.7% of them plan to leave the country after graduating.

Overall, it can be concluded that more than half of the examined students from the Republic of Serbia believe that participating in extracurricular activities offers valuable opportunities for both personal and professional development. They also consider their education, including both curricular and non-curricular activities, to be effective in preparing them to secure jobs shortly after graduating, establish their own businesses, or even pursue job opportunities abroad with their degrees. On the other hand, more students should be stimulated to be members of students' organizations, as they offer additional opportunities for development, through training, seminars, and workshops.

### **3. STUDENTS' LIFE SATISFACTION**

Life satisfaction refers to an individual's overall estimation of their contentment with different areas of life, including general satisfaction with their life as well as satisfaction with its specific aspects, including friends, family, the environment in which they live, their university/faculty, satisfaction with themselves, and such [22]. In the educational context and concerning the population of students, life satisfaction has been mostly examined in connection with students' academic achievement. Researchers have found that these two constructs are significantly related due to the fact that academic performance has a pivotal role in students' lives. Moreover, students' life satisfaction has been examined in connection with both objective indicators of academic performance and perceived academic success, with the latter showing a more consistent and stronger relationship [22], [23]. On the other hand, it has been determined that factors influencing students' life satisfaction are dependent on cultural and other characteristics of the examined population [24] and that each student population demands a separate investigation.

In the context of Serbia, students' life satisfaction has been examined in connection with students' academic performance, behavioural, and demographic characteristics, as well as sports and other physical activities [25], [26]. To complement the previous research on Serbian students, project SHINE examined more general aspects of students' life satisfaction providing a broad picture of the domains that are most significant to students and identifying areas that should be addressed by both educational institutions and policymakers.

**3.1. Life Satisfaction of Serbian Students – Results of the Project SHINE**

The SHINE project conducted several studies examining different aspects of Serbian students' satisfaction with life and their perception of its quality. The results provide insights into the areas of students' lives they are most satisfied with, the areas that may represent the concern, as well as the general estimation of students' life satisfaction. The results are also presented in the project's monography [21], and some of them include the following:

Students in Serbia are most satisfied with the people they live with. Strong family ties and a positive home environment play a crucial role in students' overall sense of well-being and satisfaction. Supportive relations within the household and functional family dynamics are essential for maintaining a positive outlook on life.

On the other hand, several areas of concern have been identified. Firstly, students report challenges in their personal life. These challenges are mostly connected to their sexual life which exhibits higher variability and lower general contentment, indicating a broad range of experiences and difficulties in this area. Secondly, students report financial difficulties and struggles. Namely, a significant number of respondents reported worries regarding their financial situation, highlighting increased levels of financial stress. The last identified source of dissatisfaction was limited access to fulfilling and enjoyable leisure activities, indicating that students should be provided with more accessible options for recreational activities.

Regarding the general estimation of students' life satisfaction, most of the respondents reported moderate life satisfaction. However, they stated that they generally felt safe and secure, which suggests that even though challenges exist, their environments still offer a sense of stability and protection.

**4. CONCLUSION**

This article addresses the important topics of students' participation in academic activities as well as students' life satisfaction. The literature review provides a theoretical background regarding these concepts, explaining the beneficial effects of student engagement in curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities on their academic performance, well-being, and social integration. The provided empirical data regarding participation in academic, primarily extracurricular, activities of Serbian students show that they consider these activities important for their education, and a powerful means for their professional and personal development. Further, the article focuses on students' life satisfaction and provides relevant empirical data regarding Serbian students. The findings highlight the importance of fostering supportive relationships as they represent the most significant source of satisfaction and comfort in students' lives. Additionally, the findings accentuate the need to address the financial challenges the students face as well as the necessity to provide them with more recreational opportunities as these aspects of students' lives represent some of the major causes of their dissatisfaction.

**Acknowledgments**

This research was supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia, 7754305, Engagement in Academic Achievements and Extracurricular Activities as Predictors of Life Satisfaction among High-school and University Students – SHINE. The authors also thank the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Organizational Sciences for its support.

## 5. REFERENCES

- [1] Finelli, C. J.; Holsapple, M. A.; Ra, E.; Bielby, R. M.; Burt, B. A.; Carpenter, D. D.; Harding, T.S.; Sutkus, J. A.: An Assessment of Engineering Students' Curricular and Co- Curricular Experiences and Their Ethical Development, *Journal of Engineering Education*, vol. 101, no. 3, pp. 469–494, 2012, doi: 10.1002/j.2168-9830.2012.tb00058.x.
- [2] Rahman, S. R.; Islam, M. A.; Akash, P. P.; Parvin, M.; Moon, N. N.; Nur, F. N.: Effects of co-curricular activities on student's academic performance by machine learning, *Current Research in Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 2, p. 100057, 2021, doi: 10.1016/j.crbeha.2021.100057.
- [3] Holland. A.; Andre, T.: Participation in Extracurricular Activities in Secondary School: What Is Known, What Needs to Be Known?, *Rev Educ Res*, vol. 57, no. 4, pp. 437–466, 1987, doi: 10.3102/00346543057004437.
- [4] Kariyana, I.; Maphosa, C.; Mapuranga, B.: The influence of learners' participation in school co-curricular activities on academic performance: assessment of educators' perceptions, *Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 137–146, 2012.
- [5] Pace, C. R.: *Measuring the quality of college student experiences*, University of California, Los Angeles, 1984.
- [6] Davis, T. M.; Murrell, P. H.: *Turning Teaching into Learning. The Role of Student Responsibility in the Collegiate Experience*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 8. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Reports, The George Washington University, Washington D.C: 1993.
- [7] Tinto, V.: *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition (2nd ed.)*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993.
- [8] Austin, A. W.: Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education, *J Coll Stud Dev*, vol. 40, pp. 518–529, 1999.
- [9] Massi, L.; Lancey, P.; Nair, U.; Straney, R.; Georgiopoulos, M.; Young, C.: Engineering and computer science community college transfers and native freshmen students: Relationships among participation in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities, connecting to the university campus, and academic success, in *2012 Frontiers in Education Conference Proceedings*, USA, Seattle, 2012, pp. 1–6. doi: 10.1109/FIE.2012.6462276.
- [10] Rienties, B.; Beusaert, S.; Grohnert, T.; Niemantsverdriet, S.; Kommers, P.: Understanding academic performance of international students: the role of ethnicity, academic and social integration, *Higher education*, vol. 63, no. 6, pp. 685–700, 2012, doi: 10.1007/s10734-011-9468-1.
- [11] Webber, K. L.; Krylow, R. B.; Zhang, Q.: Does Involvement Really Matter? Indicators of College Student Success and Satisfaction, *Journal of College Student Development*, vol. 54, no. 6, pp. 591–611, 2013, doi: 10.1353/csd.2013.0090.
- [12] Bergen-Cico, D.; Viscomi, J.: Exploring the Association between Campus Co-Curricular Involvement and Academic Achievement, *Journal of college student retention: Research, theory & practice*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 329–343, 2012, doi: 10.2190/CS.14.3.c.
- [13] Guiffrida, D. A.: How Involvement in African American Student Organizations Supports and Hinders Academic Achievement, *NACADA Journal*, vol. 24, no. 1–2, pp. 88–98, 2004, doi: 10.12930/0271-9517-24.1-2.88.
- [14] Baker, C. N.: Under-represented college students and extracurricular involvement: the effects of various student organizations on academic performance, *Social Psychology of Education*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 273–298, 2008, doi: 10.1007/s11218-007-9050-y.
- [15] Singh, A.: Effect of Co-Curricular Activities on Academic Achievement of Students, *IRA International Journal of Education and Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3, p. 241-254, 2017, doi: 10.21013/jems.v6.n3.p4.
- [16] Seow, P. S.; Pan, G.: A Literature Review of the Impact of Extracurricular Activities Participation on Students' Academic Performance, *Journal of Education for Business*, vol. 89, no. 7, pp. 361–366, 2014, doi: 10.1080/08832323.2014.912195.

- [17] Kulp, A. M.; Pascale, A. B.; Grandstaff, M.: Types of Extracurricular Campus Activities and First-Year Students' Academic Success, *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 747–767, 2021, doi: 10.1177/1521025119876249.
- [18] Ivančević, S.; Maričić, M.; Ivanović, T.; Tepšić-Ostojić, V. J.; Stošić, S. T.: Burnout and coping strategies among future healthcare professionals: A structural equation modelling approach, *Vojnosanitetski pregled*, vol. 79, no. 11, pp. 1111–1118, 2022, doi: 10.2298/VSP211006094I.
- [19] Ivančević, S.; Maričić, M.; Vlastelica, T.: Communication and academic burnout: The effects of social support and participation in decision-making, *Communications*, vol. 0, no. 0, 2023, doi: 10.1515/commun-2022-0095.
- [20] Ivančević, S.; Dmitrović, V.; Čirović, M.; Petrović, N.: Academic burnout of digital natives and social sustainability: prevalence and risk factors, *Zbornik radova Ekonomskog fakulteta u Rijeci: časopis za ekonomsku teoriju i praksu*, vol. 42, no. 2, pp. 333–360, 2024.
- [21] Mihić, M.; Bjelica, D.: *Mladi u Srbiji: Obrazovni, ekonomski i socijalni aspekti*, Univerzitet u Beogradu – Fakultet organizacionih nauka, Beograd, 2024
- [22] Suldo, S. M.; Riley, K. N.; Shaffer, E. J.: Academic Correlates of Children and Adolescents' Life Satisfaction, *School Psychology International*, vol. 27, no. 5, pp. 567–582, 2006, doi: 10.1177/0143034306073411.
- [23] Crede, J.; Wirthwein, L.; McElvany, N.; Steinmayr, R.: Adolescents' academic achievement and life satisfaction: the role of parents' education, *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 6, 2015, p. 52, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00052.
- [24] Chang, L.; McBride-Chang, C.; Stewart, S.; Au, E.: Life satisfaction, self-concept, and family relations in Chinese adolescents and children, *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 182–189, 2003, doi: 10.1080/01650250244000182.
- [25] Bjelica, D. L.; Jovanović, U. D.: It's up to you: The Influence of Sports Participation, Academic Performances and Demo-Behavioral Characteristics on University students' Life Satisfaction, *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 163–179, 2016, doi: 10.1007/s11482-014-9360-0.
- [26] Slavinski, T.; Bjelica, D.; Pavlović, D.; Vukmirović, V.: Academic Performance and Physical Activities as Positive Factors for Life Satisfaction among University Students, *Sustainability*, vol. 13, no. 2, p. 497, 2021, doi: 10.3390/su13020497.