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MACEDONIAN SCIENCE SOCIETY – BITOLA
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THE EDUCATION AT THE CROSSROADS - CONDITIONS, CHALLENGES, SOLUTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

MACEDONIAN SCIENCE SOCIETY – BITOLA
REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

THE EDUCATION AT THE CROSSROADS - CONDITIONS, CHALLENGES, SOLUTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У БЕОГРАДУ
УЧИТЕЉСКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

MACEDONIAN SCIENCE SOCIETY- BITOLA,
with the cooperation and support of
Faculty of Education Bitola at University “St. Kliment Ohridski Bitola,
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The Conference is supported
by the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

MACEDONIAN SCIENCE SOCIETY – BITOLA
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Conference Proceedings

THE EDUCATION AT THE CROSSROADS - CONDITIONS, CHALLENGES, SOLUTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

International Scientific Conference
Bitola, Republic of Macedonia, November 10-11, 2017

BITOLA
2018

PUBLISHER:
Macedonian Science Society – Bitola, Republic of Macedonia

FOR THE PUBLISHER:
Marjan Tanushevski PhD., president

Conference Proceedings from the International Scientific Conference
THE EDUCATION AT THE CROSSROADS - CONDITIONS, CHALLENGES, SOLUTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES
Bitola, Republic of Macedonia, November 10-11, 2017

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Bitola, March 2018

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WELCOME SPEECH

Dear colleagues, dear friends,

The academic community is always challenged! Or, it may be better to say that there is no calm, relaxed period, but on the contrary, every time is a new time, every day is a new day – working day. Therefore, we decided to mark the International Science Day in a working manner and to try our personal engagement to give an appropriate contribution and response to the challenges.

Education is at a crossroads, and for the decision, it is much easier when your colleagues help you. Therefore, in this occasion, I would like to thank our colleagues, supporters and co-organizers of the conference:

Faculty of Education Bitola at University "St. Kliment Ohridski Bitola; Teacher Education Faculty of the University of Belgrade; Faculty of Teacher Education at University of Zagreb; Faculty of Education in Maribor at University of Maribor; Pedagogical Faculty "St. Kliment Ohridski" at University "St. Cirilo and Methodius" Skopje; Faculty of Educational Sciences at University "Goce Delchev"- Stip; Preschool Teacher Training College "Mihailo Palov"- Vrsac, and Higher Education Centre Novo Mesto.

We are proud that the Conference is also supported by the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

Institutional top quality is complemented by the individual quality of the participants at this great academic gathering since 104 addresses arrived at our address scientific papers from 151 authors and co-authors, experts in their fields and also about 190 enthusiasts - experienced teachers who have found time to give their contribution to the debate about the directions in which the educational system of Republic of Macedonia should be driven. In this mission we shall be strongly supported by our colleagues pedagogues, didactics, methodologists, linguists and artists, educational experts from the wider region, our friends from Serbia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia, Spain, Portugal and Poland.

We are aware that the countries in the region are ahead of major reform processes, part of them had already started, and part of them are in preparation for reforming the educational system. Education was at a crossroads on many occasions and viewed from the aspect of the school infrastructure in Bitola, education was at a crossroads and in 1851 when the foundations of today's elementary school "Goce Delchev" -Bitola were laid, and in 1944, when in the first days after the liberation of Bitola, in the city and the state begins teaching in native Macedonian language, even in 1960 when the then local authorities formed the Macedonian Scientific Society-MSS. So, there have always been challenges!

Honored participants at the Conference,

As hosts we decided to work efficiently in several sessions devoted to the educational system, learning and teaching. We are glad that most of the authors of the work came to Bitola to make presentations and socialize with us, with you. Bitola offers the opportunity for relaxing walks, sightseeing and postcards, photographing and marking the event, and we do not doubt in your resourcefulness and taking "selfie" photographs. For all of you – here is a big LIKE from us, for you.

Why are we doing this!?
The student, the student above all!
That's our mission!

It is our link that strongly connects synergies and motivates. We, who deal with this extremely noble and grateful work, we know that it will be completed when the laborers see the

light of the day. That's why we will make a Collection book of papers. Yes, it is this book which now each of you has in his/her hand to analyze, compare, read and re-read. This collection is not only for the authors, but also for students, students ... and they have something to read, because in its content there are modern methodologies, the characteristics of the context of learning and learning, and situations that arise from everyday life, from the real life. We are convinced that it is unacceptable for a student who is near or at a crossroad does not know which way he will continue! Here we are to help!

This Collection of papers will be in the hands of the representatives of the competent institutions, the creators of public policies in the sphere of education. We will inform the Ministries of Education and Science in the countries of the region, that is, the countries where you come from, what we did in Bitola these days. We offer answers to open issues with a single goal, directly contributing to strengthening the capacity of the educational system. We know that it is not easy, neither can we now and immediately, but we have agreed to offer solutions and perspectives!

The Macedonian Scientific Society-Bitola has a road sign when you are at a crossroads!
I congratulate you on your creativity!

Enjoy the work done!
Read ...

Sincerely,
Prof. Dr. Marjan Tanushevski,
President of the Macedonian Scientific Society-Bitola and
President of the International Scientific Conference
"Education at the Crossroads"

Daniela Andonovska-Trajkovska[1]
Silvana Neshkovska[2]
Mimoza Bogdanoska Jovanovska[3]

SOME KEY CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING TODAY'S UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Abstract

This paper has the profile of today's university students as its focal point. The key question raised here is whether higher education nowadays is compatible with the new profile of students, i.e. whether higher education adequately meets the needs of the new generations of students.

This paper attempts to dissect the profile of these new generations of students, and, by uncovering some of their distinctive features, to determine whether higher education is in line with students' needs and expectations, or whether perhaps is in dire need of change and upgrading.

The instruments used in this research are two tailor-made questionnaires with both open and close-ended questions - one intended for tackling the students' point of view and the other one for their professors'. A wide variety of questions are raised in the questionnaires including students' motivation, behavior, needs, expectations, academic performance and achievements. The influence of the extensive use of technology and the socio-economic and political conditions on the general mind-set of students is also tackled by some of the questions.

The questionnaires have been distributed among university students and professors from various university units at "St. Kliment Ohridski" University – Bitola. The qualitative and quantitative analysis of their responses brought to the forefront some key considerations regarding the profile of today's students, such as: contemporary students' demeanor is shaped by ICT to a great extent; students are apt to achieve high academic results, but they prefer practice to theory, and active to passive role in the process of learning; students are not keen on staying in their homeland after graduation. All these findings are quite indicative of the necessary changes that await our tertiary education in the near future.

Key words: university students, attitude, motivation, profile

Introduction

As the first decades of the 21st century unfold, societies worldwide seem to be in a constant state of flux. Novelties in all aspects of social life aimed primarily at improving the quality of life are introduced as a matter of course, sweeping off all previous practices irreversibly. All these fast-paced changes, for the most part, are triggered by the rapid progress made in information and communication technologies (ICT). The open access to virtually all conceivable types of information; the drastically faster pace of obtaining information; the abundance of data that reach us all on a daily basis, the ways in which we communicate, etc. can all be attributed to the transformational, and almost large-than-life 'power' of ICT.

Higher education, with all its stakeholders, is not immune to these global trends. The traditional classroom and the traditional way of transmitting and disseminating knowledge are no longer sustainable in these utterly changed conditions. The students and teachers themselves, who are rightfully very often referred to as 'digital natives' and 'digital migrants', respectively, are heavily affected by these global changes. However, while the former enthusiastically and quite naturally embrace the novelties instigated by ICT, the latter, especially those who belong to the older generations, sometimes find it really hard to come to terms with the practical implementation of ICT.

[1] Associate professor, PhD., "St. Kliment Ohridski" University, Faculty of Education-Bitola
[2] Assistant professor, PhD., "St. Kliment Ohridski" University, Faculty of Education-Bitola
[3] Assistant professor, PhD., "St. Kliment Ohridski" University, Faculty of Information and Communication Technologies-Bitola

The Republic of Macedonia, despite being a tiny, seriously economically-challenged country, makes real efforts to keep pace with these global ICT-motivated trends. More specifically, in the last two decades in the Republic of Macedonia, numerous concrete measures have been taken to ensure the competitiveness of its tertiary education, and to consequently boost the employability of its graduated students. The ultimate goal understandably is to lower the country's dauntingly high level of unemployment. Thus, for instance, higher education was vigorously and persistently promoted by government-sponsored campaigns, aimed at persuading as many people as possible to enroll at university. As a result, many new private and state universities were opened; new university units within the already existing universities were established, and dispersed studies in many parts of the country were also introduced. Along these lines, efforts were also made to change the Law on Higher Education, which, in turn, spurred a lot of controversies, and created many new dilemmas, whose resolution is still underway.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that today's Macedonian society witnesses an increasing and worrying surge of migration, and one considerable part of it is composed either of students who much more readily place their trust in foreign universities than in domestic ones, or of graduate students who prefer to pursue their postgraduate studies and practice their profession abroad. Hence, the question that currently presses for immediate consideration is *whether higher education today in our country, with all its resources and capacities, is actually aligned or is in total disparity with the new generations of students, and their needs and expectations*.

That is why the study at hand sets out to investigate and possibly find the answer to the question raised above, by conducting a thorough analysis of the general profile of Macedonian students nowadays. Namely, in an attempt to reveal students' main distinctive features, the focus is placed on analyzing: a) students' attitude towards their studies, b) the role of the ICT in the making of their mindset, and c) the impact of the general political, social and economic circumstances on students' motivation for studying and on their plans for the future.

In the sections that follow, first, we touch upon some relevant findings regarding university student profile globally, and, then, we present the results of the present study, which are followed by a discussion and conclusion.

Theoretical background

Education at all its levels, including tertiary education, has undergone some drastic changes throughout the centuries. One of its key features that has been constantly altered and remodeled is the role of students. Thus, until the 20th century students were expected to be only passive recipients who would listen carefully to their teachers, take notes, fully absorb, memorize, and, at a later stage, reproduce the acquired knowledge. In the 20th century, the focus was entirely shifted on the students. They were practically treated as equal partners in the educational process, guided and encouraged by their teachers to be actively engaged in class and in the process of acquiring new knowledge and skills (Bonwell and Eison, 1991). The students of this period are normally referred to as Baby Boomers (born late 1940s to early 1960s), and Generation X (born mid1960s to late 1970s) (Tinget al., 2017).

The evolution of the educational process continued well into the 21st century. Today's students, again assisted by their teachers, are expected to aim at achieving even higher objectives. Their priority now has become to equip themselves not only with solid knowledge in the subject matter they are majoring in, but also with critical and creative thinking abilities, life-long learning skills, problem solving and communicative skills, entrepreneurial spirit, etc. These abilities and skills mentioned above are crucial not only for surviving but also for achieving success in modern ICT-driven societies.

One cannot help but notice the huge mismatch between the twenty-first–century students, and the preceding generations of students. As Diana Oblinger astutely puts it in her paper "Understanding Today's Learners" (2003) students nowadays "are wired differently from previous generations because they have been exposed to different kinds of stimuli. In fact, what distinguishes them from their predecessors, according to Oblinger is that they "are comfortable

using the new technology; are constantly connected to information and other people, prefer experiential or 'hand-on learning'; expect immediate results and are very social."

Similar qualifications of the current generations of students, widely-known as Millennials (born between 1980 and 2000) have been offered by other researchers who have also dealt with this issue. Howe & Straus (2000) describe them as "achievement oriented, more pressured to achieve academically, more confident in their abilities, accepting of diversity, and report feeling close and trusting of their parents. They are referred to as the Net Generation because they are technology savvy." Oblinger & Oblinger (2006) highlight the fact that these students "have grown up using computers and technology … that their social networks have been established through use of technology and the internet." They also stress that what is truly important for these students is to feel connected and to use activities such as IM (Instant messages), text messages, on-line video games, music downloads, Myspace and Facebook as ways to reinforce social interaction." Similarly, Tapscott (2002) also purports that these adolescents prefer learning by doing and are more comfortable with image-rich environments rather than with text. Quan-Haase (2007) also notes that students prefer "interactive, synchronous forms of online communication, such as IM, over less immediate forms such as email".

Evidently research shows that today students' general behavior is greatly determined and shaped by technology. Consequently, teachers, policy makers and the education system overall, in order to accommodate students successfully in the contemporary educational setting, have to introduce reforms and continuous upgrading of the education system.

However, Kenneth et al. (2004) draw attention to the fact that educational policies and educational reforms aimed at improving teaching and learning in one country greatly depend on the political conditions in that particular country, i.e. on the general political situation in that country. In other words, favorable political climate in one country will have positive implications on the educational system as a whole. Conversely, unfavorable "economic and social forces within the home country sometimes serve to "push" students abroad and have strong influence (mostly negative) on students' motivation for learning and development" (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002).

Taking into account that the entire humanity nowadays, in a way, is bound to live in a so-called 'global society', one might rightfully assume that, more or less, these general qualifications of students worldwide are applicable to a great extent to our Macedonian students as well.

Methodology

As the aim of this study is to comprehend and portray the profile of contemporary university students in the Republic of Macedonia, the focus is actually put on the following three main aspects: a) students' behavior towards their studies; b) the influence of ICT on students' behavior and mindset in general, and c) the influence of the current socio-economic and political conditions on students' motivation and plans for the future.

In close correlation with the above mentioned aspects, the study, in fact, sets out to either confirm or to refute the following three **hypotheses**:

1. Contemporary Macedonian university students, in general, take their studies rather light-heartedly;
2. The ICT shape students' mindset and overall behavior to a great extent.
3. The changeable and unstable socio-economic and political conditions in Macedonia make students less enthusiastic about their studies, and, eventually, much less keen on staying and finding a job in their homeland.

Furthermore, in order to render findings which will be as relevant and objective as possible, the inspection and analysis of these three general aspects is approached from both students and teachers' perspective.

To that end, two online tailor-made questionnaires produced by means of the Google Forms application – one intended for students and the other one for university professors – were selected as the principle instrument for gathering information for the purposes of this research. Both

questionnaires were comprised of three sets of open and close-ended questions, which were completely the same in both the students and the teachers' questionnaire.

The first set of questions were supposed to yield some insights into how students approach their studies, i.e. whether they attend lectures regularly; whether they pass their exams in a timely manner; if they aspire to obtain high grades; whether they prefer interactive over traditional teaching, etc.

The second set of questions tackled the influence of ICT on the making of student profile. In that respect, both students and teachers were supposed to state whether ICT hinders or boosts the progress students make in their studies; how much time students spend using social media; whether this new mode of communication consolidates their social and communicative skills, etc.

Last but not least, the third set of questions was supposed to elicit answers as to whether the rather unstable socio-political and economic conditions in the country affect students' motivation to study and to pursue postgraduate studies or professional career in their native country.

The questionnaires were sent online to both students and university professors from various university units within "St. Kliment Ohridski" University – Bitola, located in various towns across the country – Bitola, Veles, Kichevo, Ohrid, Skopje and Prilep. Within the one-week deadline set for the respondents, ninety-six questionnaires were sent back – 81 filled-in by students and 22 by university professors.

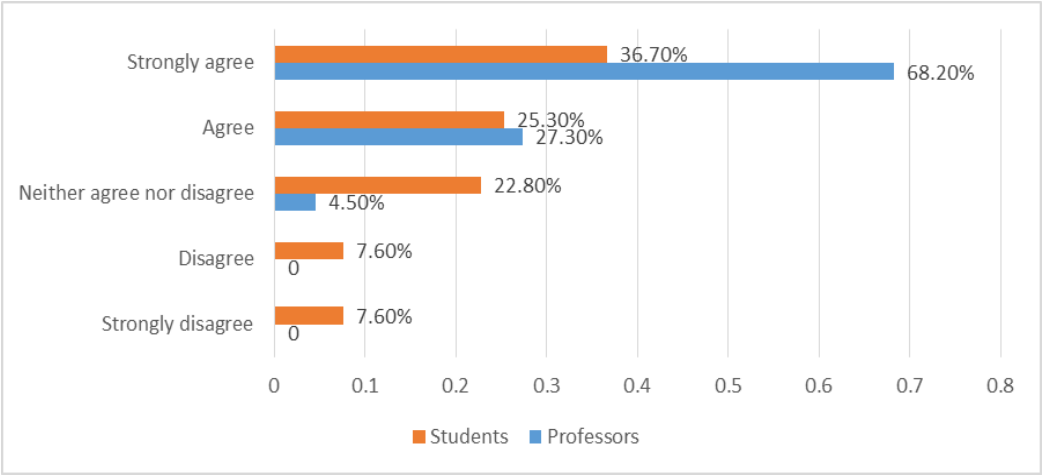
In analyzing their responses, a combination of the qualitative and quantitative research paradigm was utilized. The summing up of the respondents' answers was greatly alleviated by the option for automatic summary offered by the Google Forms application itself.

Results and Discussion

The results have shown that:

- The students have chosen their studies, because they are interested in those specific types of studies (approximately 70% of the professors and of the students agree with this). In addition, the university unit they have selected has fullfilled their expectations regarding their studies (according to 73.9% of the professors and 62.9% of the students).
- According to the professors, the students are not fully prepared for their academic studies when they enroll at university.
- Students are attending their classes on a regular basis in most of the cases (according to 88% of the students and 56.5% of the professors), and the lessons are attuned to their needs (according to 70.2% of the students and 95.4% of the professors).
- The majority of the professors (60.9%) neither agree nor disagree with the statement that the students make efforts to pass their exams with high grades. 65% of the students also agree with this statement.
- When it comes to taking exams, 60.9% of the professors believe that sometimes students prepare for the exams immediately prior to the exams, and sometimes – continuously throughout the whole semester. 66.2% of the students share the same opinion. In addition, 39.1% of the professors think that the students prepare for the exams shortly before taking the exams, which doesn't collide with the students' opinion (20.8% study on a regular basis, and only 13% prior to exams).
- Students take the exams on a regular basis and without difficulties (68% of the students, and 43.5% of the professors; 52.2% of the professors neither agree nor disagree with this statement). In addition, in most of the cases, the students are content with their grades (according to 65.2% of the professors and 65% of the students).
- The process of taking exams is not stressful according to 43.6% of the students, whereas 37.2% of the students neither agree nor disagree with this.
- The study programs and the mode in which they are organized and conveyed prepare the students appropriately for their future professional duties and tasks (according to 86.9% of the professors and 64.1% of the students).

- Students prefer interactive teaching methods to traditional ones (according to 82.6% of the professors and 75.3% of the students).
- Professors think that they develop their students' critical thinking, communicative skills and problem-solving skills in higher education, but the students do not fully agree on this issue (Graph 1).

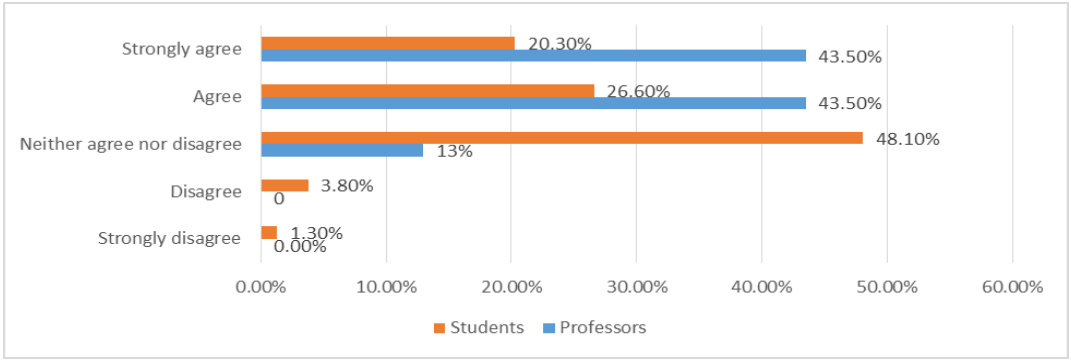


Graph 1. Professors develop critical thinking, communicative skills and problem-solving skills in higher education

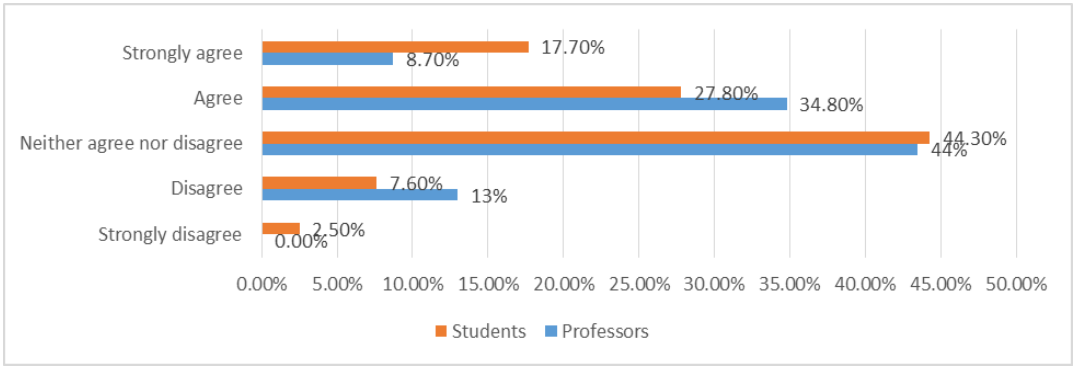
The results regarding the attitudes of the students toward their studies and their approach to learning, and the opinion of the professors about the students' academic behavior lead to the conclusion that we cannot accept the first hypothesis that *Contemporary Macedonian university students, in general, take their studies rather light-heartedly.* As shown above, students' decision regarding their majors is quite in line with their desired future profession. In addition, the students' and the professors' opinion slightly differs when it comes to students' class attendance and preparation for exams, as well as the difficulties students face while taking their exams and their aspiration for obtaining higher grades. The professors think that the students do not put a lot of effort in preparing for their exams continuously, and that they do not face many difficulties and are not stressed-out in the process of taking exams. The professors have no opinion whether their students have high aspiration for academic success or not, but the students state that they are apt for achieving better academic results.

The majority of the students use social media from 2 to 4 hours per day (47.4%) and more than 4 hours per day (39.4%) which is an expected result having in mind that they have ICT literally in their pockets via their smart phones at all time. Still, this finding is rather disappointing considering the fact that thus students detach themselves from reality and virtual reality becomes their only reality.

We can see from the results presented in Graph 2 and 3 that professors believe that the students use social media for fun (48.1%), but also for learning (45.5%). Similarly, the students themselves say that they use social media for fun (46.9%), and for studying (43.5%) as well. In addition, the fact that many of the students neither agree nor disagree on this issue is quite disappointing (48.1% - regarding the issue of using social media for fun, and 44.3% - regarding using social media for learning).This leads us to infer that students use social media automatically, without having any specific intent to achieve objectives related to learning or some other activities. However, this conclusion needs further research in order to be fully supported by additional pieces of evidence.

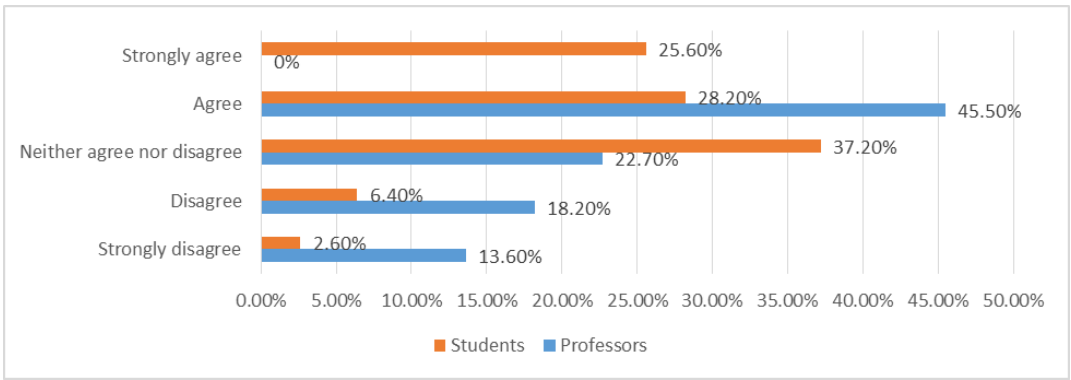


Graph 2. Students use social media for fun



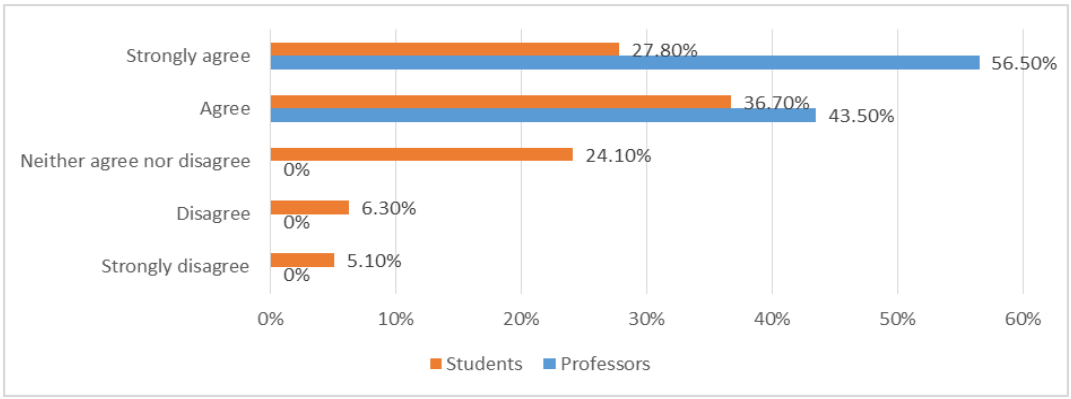
Graph 3. Students use social media for learning

Social media improve students' communicative skills according to 53.8% of the students, and 45.5% of the professors. The results presented in Graph 4 indicate that the majority of the professors either disagree – 31.8%, or neither agree nor disagree – 22.7%.



Graph 4. Social media improve students' communicative skills

Professors integrate ICT in their teaching (Graph 5), which indicates that the professors are attuned to the students' needs regarding the presence of technology in the classroom. Nevertheless, within the scope of this study we cannot make any conclusions regarding whether their use of ICT really addresses students' needs and how ICT is integrated in the teaching and learning process. This issue, in fact, can also be further pursued in a subsequent study.

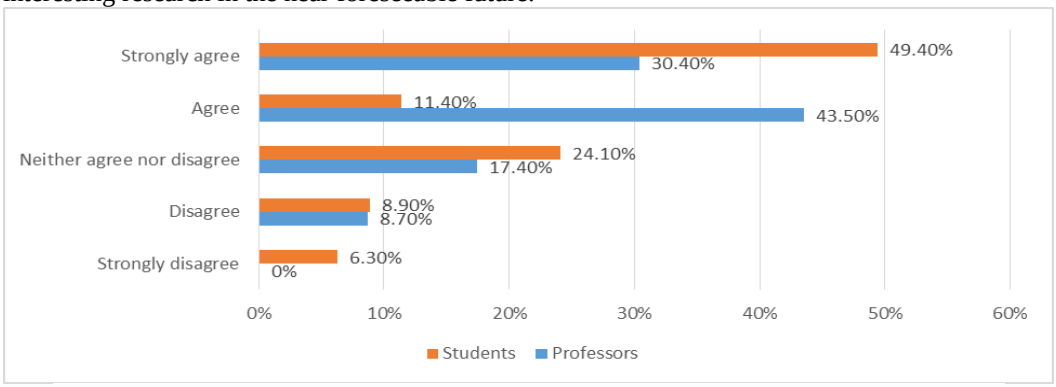


Graph 5. Professors integrate ICT in the classroom

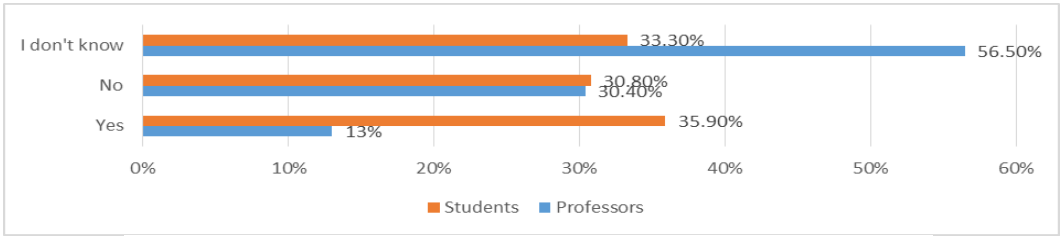
The professors prefer to communicate with their students personally most of the time (according to approximately 95.6% of the professors and the students), or via e-mail (78.2%).The professors never or very rarely communicate with their students via phone or Facebook (according to approximately 56.5% of the professors and the students).

These results show that the second hypothesis that *the ICT, to a great extent, shape the students' mindset and their overall behavior* is acceptable. In fact, the results show that the students spend most of their time on social media either for fun or for learning, and they are also exposed to ICT in the process of the structured knowledge gaining during the lectures.

Only 13.8% of the students have participated in a student exchange program; 71.8% have never participated in one, but they would like to do that in the future. A small minority of the students are not interested in student exchange programs (24.4%). Moreover, only 10.4% of the students have visited a foreign country via the Work and Travel Program; 68.8% have not done that yet, but they would like to do it in the future; and 20.8% are not interested in it at all. This shows that a small percentage of the students use the opportunities for student mobility, but they would like to do that in the future. This finding can serve as a solid starting point for yet another interesting research in the near foreseeable future.



Graph 6. Influence of the unstable socio-economic and political conditions on students' motivation



Graph 7. Students are willing to find job and to stay in our country after graduation

The actual socio-economic and political conditions in their homeland make students less enthusiastic about their studies (according to 73.9% of the students). One third of the students are willing to find a job in their homeland, whereas one third will look for a job in a foreign country. One third has not come up with a decision on this issue. Most of the professors do not have an opinion about this. Therefore, the third hypothesis that *the changeable and unstable socio-economic and political conditions in Macedonia make students less enthusiastic about their studies, and, eventually, much less keen on staying and finding a job in their native country* is also acceptable.

The things that students most like regarding their studies are: the quality of the study programs; the freedom they have when it comes to organizing their time; the opportunities for putting theory into practice; acquiring knowledge and experience by means of student mobility programs; the availability and cooperativeness of the academic staff; the interactive classrooms and pedagogical practice; and the fact that they are seen and respected as individuals by their professors and other students. There are also things that students dislike regarding their studies, such as: some outdated subjects whose contents are presented to them by means of old-fashioned educational methodology that does not correspond with students' contemporary needs; the administrative obligations to register for each following semester or to register for taking exams; the long hours dedicated to theory during the lectures; taking a series of mid-term exams in the course of a single week; the fact that the university units are not fully-equipped and well-prepared to organize field work for their students.

Conclusion

The stakes for tertiary education nowadays, in these conditions of constant and rapid changes worldwide, are truly high. Being the ultimate level of education, higher education has to be continuously vigilant of what happens in the other spheres of human existence, so that it can quickly redefine, realign and reshape itself according to the popular demands of any given time. Stubbornly sticking to the old traditions, irrespective of how successful they used to be in the past, would only mean lagging behind the general global trends of progress and advancement. That, in turn, would result in higher education practically losing its sole purpose which is enabling the new generations of young people to successfully qualify for particular job profiles. In other words, failure to modernize and upgrade its capacity on a constant basis, in the context of tertiary education means running the risk of gravely backfiring in its attempt to prepare students to face contemporary challenges head-on, and to integrate fully and more easily into the societal life as productive, knowledgeable and reasonable individuals capable of driving things forward on the global stage.

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Publisher
Macedonian Science Society – Bitola, Republic of Macedonia
e-mail: mss.bitola@gmail.com
web: www.mnd-bitola.mk

For the publisher
Marjan Tanushevski PhD., president

Conference Proceedings
THE EDUCATION AT THE CROSSROADS - CONDITIONS, CHALLENGES, SOLUTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES
International Scientific Conference
Bitola, Republic of Macedonia, November 10-11, 2017

Graphic design and cover
Vesna Mundishevska-Veljanovska

Print
"Grafoprom" – Bitola

Copies
200

Bitola, March 2018

CIP - Каталогизација во публикација
Национална и универзитетска библиотека "Св. Климент Охридски", Скопје

37(062)

INTERNATIONAL scientific conference (2017 ; Bitola)
The education at the crossroads - conditions, challenges, solutions and perspectives : conference proceedings / International scientific conference Bitola, Republic of Macedonia, November 10 - 11, 2017. - Битола : Македонско научно друштво, 2018. - 312 стр. : илустр. ; 23 см

Фусноти кон текстот. - Библиографија кон трудовите

ISBN 978-608-4616-89-4

а) Образование - Собири
COBISS.MK-ID 106966794

ISBN 978-608-4616-89-4

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