



THE STATE, ACCESSIBILITY, AND SIGNIFICANCE OF EDUCATION IN SERBIA

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Abstract

International conventions state that the right to an education is a basic human right which countries are obliged to guarantee. In Serbia, as in most countries, this right is guaranteed by the Constitution. However, data on a large part of the structure of the Serbian population with a lower level of educational attainment indicated that one part of the citizens did not realize this right since they did not continue their education after primary school. Therefore, the aim was to determine how the citizens of Serbia evaluated the state of education in Serbia as a whole (its quality), the accessibility (whether there are fair opportunities in education for all categories of the population), and the significance of education in Serbia (whether the knowledge acquired, and skills developed are relevant for employment). The results were obtained by analyzing the latest data from the European Social Survey (ESS) from 2018/2019 in Serbia on a sample of 2043 interviewees. The study was carried out by trained interviewers, in face-to-face interviews. The initial hypotheses were confirmed: a) a low prevalence of high grades for the state of education as a whole, the accessibility, and significance of education in Serbia, and b) that there is a difference in the perception of education depending on some of the socio-demographic characteristics of the interviewees. The creation of a favorable social and institutional environment and changes in the education policy are preconditions for the improvement of the quality and accessibility of education in Serbia.

Keywords: education availability, education significance, education quality, social inequality, Serbia

Introduction

Social development, the personal interests and needs of individuals require a quality education which is, on the one hand, a precondition, and on the other, an expression of the level of cultural and socio-economic progress of each country. The beginning of the 21st century was marked by deep changes in the global society and the rapid development of the post-industrial society. The age of globalization is characterized by international connections, strengthening of the role of international institutions, the dominance of knowledge, and the rapid transfer of information from one corner of the world to another (Gidens, 2003). The significance of education in particular is increasing in contemporary society, when all forms of life are becoming more complex, when high technology is being introduced, and the need for constant changes, innovations and discoveries is being intensified. Education is ascribed an important role since contemporary systems could not function and exist without it, and one of the basic tasks of education is to get people used to change. The social significance of education can be viewed through its importance for social development, the development of the productive powers of society, of social and material reproduction, the social position of those acquiring an education, and the formation of their personalities. Education has a deciding role not only in the development of personality during one's entire life, but also in the development of all of society, which is necessary for a move towards a "society of education", and the creation of an educational society based on the acquisition, activation, and application of knowledge (Delor, 1996).

One of the more recent documents passed by the EU regarding the scope and conditions of education is the *European Pillar of Social Rights* which the European Commission ratified in 2017. The document contains twenty key principles, four of which refer to education, which confirms the significance of education for economic and social development. The first principle states that everyone has the right to a high quality and inclusive education and life-long learning to sustain and improve the skills and knowledge which could enable them to take part in the social community without hinderance, and to successfully adapt to the changes and requirements of the job market. The second principle states that women and men are equal in all rights and conditions for acquiring an education, and the third that each citizen has the right to an equal position in terms of education and accessibility to public goods and services (the emphasis is on marginalized groups in particular). Principle eleven states that children have the right to a quality education which is accessible to everyone, as well as the right to protection from poverty.

Investing in education as an important resource which is the instigator and basis for the development of society is part of the politics of all developed countries. Developed countries have noted the importance of knowledge and its application in terms of development and overcoming crises. People and their intellectual and creative potentials represent a strategic basis for the development of society, since they are the bearers of ideas, knowledge, and information (Račić, 2013, p. 96). The issue of the accessibility of education as a dimension of the quality of education is very current and complex, as it includes questions of social inequality and the mechanisms of social selection in education. Research into the perceptions of the state of education and the problems which arise in the form of the inaccessibility of education for members of various social groups, as well as the significance of education, is of considerable importance for a complete view of the quality of education, but also of social inequality in education. Social inequality is found in all areas of social life and affects various social groups, thus affecting the possibility of choice and the quality of education of an individual (for more details see Antonić, 2013; Cvejić, 2012; Marković Krstić & Milošević Radulović, 2015, 2020; Miladinović, 2011). The social structure affects the way of life of an individual, especially the process of their socialization and education, so it is very important to study the impact of social inequality on the educational potential of individuals (the accessibility of education) and the various forms of inequality in the field of education outlined in numerous theoretical approaches (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Dirkem, 1981; Gamoran, 2001; Georgievski, 1997; Parsons, 1961).

Considering that contemporary society is a society of knowledge, the basic assumption for its development is knowledge and continued improvement, and its basic resource are individuals in possession of new knowledge and new skills. Therefore, it is necessary for education to be accessible to all citizens so that they could be equipped to take on various social roles, but also that the acquired knowledge and skills developed during education could be adequately valued on the job market and when seeking employment.

An imperative of the educational systems today is the democratization of education, that is, realizing rights to an education and the accessibility of education, as well as opening the way to its mass development on all levels. "Through the democratization of education, the principle of equal opportunities for all is promoted, a principle which incorporates the fundamental values of western culture (fairness, equality), and which is focused on bridging the gap between the rich and the poor" (Matejić Đuričić & Filipović, 2014, p. 88, authors' translation). The right to an education includes: 1) the right to *receive* an education, 2) the right to *choose* the type of education, and 3) the right to an *equal* education. The right to receive an education refers to the obligation of the state to provide and finance a system of education, the right to choose a type of education most often refers to the right to an education in a private school, in one's native tongue, or in adherence to one's religious and moral convictions, while the right to an equal

education refers to the decrease in inequality in the approach to education which affects poor children, children with disability or developmental issues, or groups exposed to discrimination (Rabin, 2007; cited in Vuković, 2017, p. 133).

These rights are stated in the *Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System of the Republic of Serbia* (2021). Primary education in Serbia is compulsory and free, while secondary education is free, but not compulsory. Article 3 of this *Law* cites that “every person shall have the right to education” and that the “the citizens of the Republic of Serbia shall be equal in exercising their right to education and pedagogy”. It also states that a “person with developmental impairments and disabilities shall be entitled to education and pedagogy which takes into consideration their educational needs within the regular education and pedagogy system, within the regular system with individual or group additional assistance or in a special group or school”. An individual with exceptional abilities “shall be entitled to education which takes into consideration their special educational needs, within the regular system, within special classes or within a special school”. Article 7 outlines the general principles of education, where it is also indicated that a system of education and pedagogy must be provided for all children, learners, and adults, along with “equality and accessibility of education and pedagogy based on social justice and the principle of equal opportunities without discrimination”, as well as a “balanced high-quality education and pedagogy, based on the achievements of modern sciences”.

Following the introduction of compulsory and free primary education¹ (1952), there was an expansion of secondary, higher, and high education, as well as an improvement in the educational structure of the population. However, as pointed out by Matejić Đuričić and Filipović, a higher education does not mean the same as education for all, since an expansion of education leads to a “recomposition” of inequality, and the social differences among individuals and groups do not disappear but are delayed (“postponed elimination”) (2014, p. 93). The results of their study *Expansion of education: the reality and appearance of equal opportunities in education* (in Serbian: *Ekspanzija obrazovanja: realnost i privid jednakih šansi u dostupnosti obrazovanja*) confirms this, and also confirms Bourdieu’s hypotheses on education “reproducing” inequality. In order to answer the question why under conditions of a structural crisis the significance of the ascribed (“inherited”) features increases, while the significance of personal achievement decreases, the key concepts that were used were segregational democratization and cascade competition, along with an annulment of the democratic principle of equal opportunities. Opportunities in terms of the accessibility of education were tested at the level of entry into the education system, the diversification of the educational process, and the social valorization of the acquired diplomas (2014, p. 87–103).

The social context in which the evaluation of the state of the education system, the accessibility of education, and the (in) equality of educational opportunities are studied, along with the knowledge acquired and skills developed during education for the inclusion of individuals from various social groups in the job market, is the economic, political, and social crisis which began in the 1980s. The crisis escalated at the beginning of the 1990s, and its long-term and synergetic effects today are reflected in all the aspects of life and work in Serbia, its institutions, and its citizens.

The significance of research into the state of the education system, the availability of education, and the (in)equality of educational opportunities for members of various social groups in Serbia is reflected in the fact that it allows future analysts to gain insight into various social aspects pertaining to education. Mapping certain problems in the education system and comparing education trends in Serbia with those of other European countries could provide the basis for the creation of public policy which might contribute to their solution.

¹ A compulsory eight-year education was introduced in 1952 in the *General Education Law*.

Research Questions

The main research question refers to how the citizens of Serbia rated the state of education as a whole, the accessibility, and the significance of education in Serbia. This research question includes the answers to the following questions:

1. What are the results of the evaluation of the state (quality) of education as a whole in Serbia?
2. What are the results of the evaluation of the existence of equal/fair opportunities for the desired level of educational attainment in Serbia for each interviewee?
3. What are the results of the evaluation of the existence of equal/fair opportunities for the desired level of educational attainment for every citizen?
4. What are the results of the evaluation of the significance of the knowledge acquired and skills developed for deciding whether a person should or should not be given a job in Serbia?

Research Methodology

General Background

The European Social Survey (ESS) was carried out in Serbia in 2018/2019, financed from national and European sources – The Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development and the Swiss foundation for development and cooperation HELVETAS, via the “PERFORM” project. Databases containing the compiled data were published in May 2020 on the official website of the ESS².

The ESS is the study of social attitudes, beliefs, and the behavior of individuals in European countries. Over the past eight cycles 37 countries participated in it, while 29 participated during the ninth cycle, along with Serbia which was included for the first time. The quality of the data compiled as part of this study, which enjoys an international reputation, is considerable. The data is used by the European Commission, national governments, political analysts, advisory bodies, politicians, journalists, researchers, and students. The study was carried out in accordance with the highest methodological protocols (the approach used to determine the sample, the response rate, design of the questionnaire, the field protocol, etc.)³ so that the data from all the countries taking part in the ESS could be compared.

Research into the state and availability of education in Serbia relies on the functionalist theoretical perspective of viewing education as the preparation of an individual to perform certain social roles and assume their position on the social hierarchical ladder (Durkheim, 1981), as well as the tenets of the theory of educational capital which refer to the mechanisms and reproduction of social inequality in education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Therefore, the initial assumptions of the research were: a) that there is a small prevalence of high grades regarding the state (quality) of education as a whole, the accessibility, and significance of education in Serbia, and b) that perceptions of education differ depending on some of the socio-demographic characteristics of the interviewees (gender, age, level of educational attainment, type of job of the interviewee, regional belonging).

Sample

The interviewees who made up the sample were citizens of Serbia over the age of 15. The sample was compiled in 2018 and is based on data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of

2 The databases, questionnaire and a description of the data compilation are available at: <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/country.html?c=serbia>; the validity is available at: https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/ess_methodology/data_quality.html; and ponder (weights) at: https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/ess_methodology/data_processing_archiving/weighting.html

3 For more details on the research see: www.europeansocialsurvey.org

Serbia obtained from the last Census held in 2011. The data referred to households, and covered almost all the municipalities in Serbia. The sample was compiled based on the addresses of 3605 households. The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia created a representative list of potential interviewees based on a random sample containing data on the households in Serbia, and the total number of interviewees from Serbia was 2043. If the interviewee was under the age of 16 during the interview, the parents or guardians were asked for permission for participation. The parents/guardians also had the opportunity to ask to view the questionnaire beforehand.

The ESS is led by the principle that samples must be representative for all individuals over the age of 15 (without an upper age limit), who live in private households in each country the study is being carried out in, irrespective of their nationality, citizenship, or native language. The interviewees are selected by rigorous methods of random probability and all the countries must strive for the minimum “effective achieved sample size” of 1.500, or 800 in countries with a population of less than 2 million.⁴

Instruments and Procedure

The research instrument was a standardized questionnaire, and the survey was carried out by trained interviewers during face-to-face interviews. The interview lasted approximately one hour. Considering that this study adheres to the highest methodological standards, the training of the interviewers was quite complex. The interviewers asked questions and noted down the responses to ensure that the differences in the responses reflect the differences in their attitudes and behavior, and not the differences in the way in which they were asked the questions or how their responses were recorded. The European Social Survey adheres to the principle that all the interviewees should receive an equal amount of introductory information, to be in a situation where they could focus on the questions they were asked, and respond without being influenced by anyone and that they should not read the questions themselves. The questions in the survey which referred to the state (quality), availability, and significance of education were of a closed type (multiple choice), while the questions regarding the state (quality) and availability of education were offered to the interviewees in the form of quantitative modalities of grades ranging from 0 to 10. For a more precise analysis and crossed variables they were collapsed into five categories: 1 – unsatisfactory (0, exceptionally poor); 2 – satisfactory (1, 2, 3); 3 – good (4, 5, 6); 4 – very good (7, 8, 9); 5 – excellent (10, exceptionally good).

Participation in the study was voluntary. The interviewees were free to choose which questions they did or did not want to answer, as well as terminate the interview at any point with no explanation. All the personal data of the interviewees are protected⁵ in accordance with the Data Protection Law, while access to the data compiled during the study was only granted to researchers who applied for it and were given permission, and who also signed non-disclosure agreements⁶.

4 A professional committee was in charge of the sampling and the pondering. Each of the national coordination teams was responsible for a sample design which adhered to the sampling principles of the ESS suited for use in their country, and to that effect they had the support of a member of the Sampling and Weighing Expert Panel of the ESS. For more on the principles of sampling in the ESS and sampling guidelines see: https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/round9/methods/ESS9_sampling_guidelines.pdf

5 A complete notification on privacy is available at: www.europeansocialsurvey.org/about/privacy.html

6 The study procedure and data control were carried out by The European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ESS ERIC) whose headquarters are in London (Great Britain). The individual in charge of carrying out the study and data control in Serbia is D. Stanojević, PhD as the National coordinator, the Institute for Sociological Research of the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, ESS ERIC is the Data Controller, while the national institution in charge of data protection is the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, the Information Commissioner's Office UK.

Data Analysis

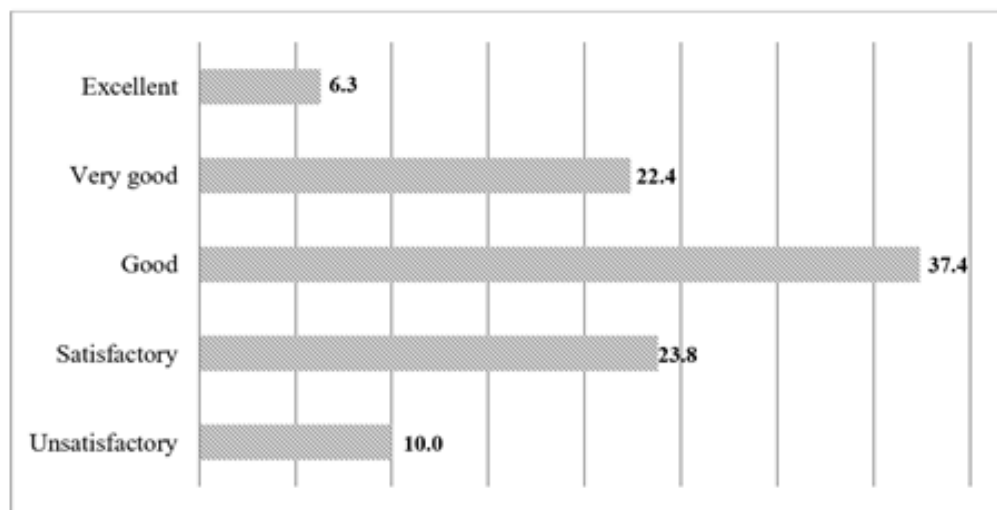
In accordance with the aim of the study, suitable statistical procedures were used to analyze the results. The analysis included descriptive statistics and the determination of basic statistical indicators (frequency distribution and percentages). The statistical significance of the differences in the evaluation of the state of education as a whole, the accessibility, and significance of education based on the socio-demographic characteristics of the interviewees (gender, age, level of educational attainment, job of the interviewee, regional belonging) was tested using χ^2 . The data were processed through the SPSS program for statistical data analysis.

Research Results

The evaluation of the state (quality) of education in Serbia as a whole and its accessibility were viewed through the responses of the citizens (provided in the form of grades ranging from 1 to 5, that is, from an exceptionally poor to exceptionally good education), on the (non)existence of fair opportunities for the desired level of educational attainment for each interviewee, and the (non)existence of the opportunity for the desired level of educational attainment for every citizen. In addition to these indicators of the state and accessibility of education, the significance of education as a factor which could contribute to successful employment was also taken into consideration, and the citizens were asked about the importance of individual factors (the knowledge acquired, and the skills developed during education; connections to someone in the organization in question) when seeking employment in Serbia. Figure 1 presents the evaluation of the state (quality) of education in Serbia based on five modalities: unsatisfactory (exceptionally poor), satisfactory, good, very good, and excellent (exceptionally good).

Figure 1

An Evaluation of the State of Education as a Whole in Serbia (%)



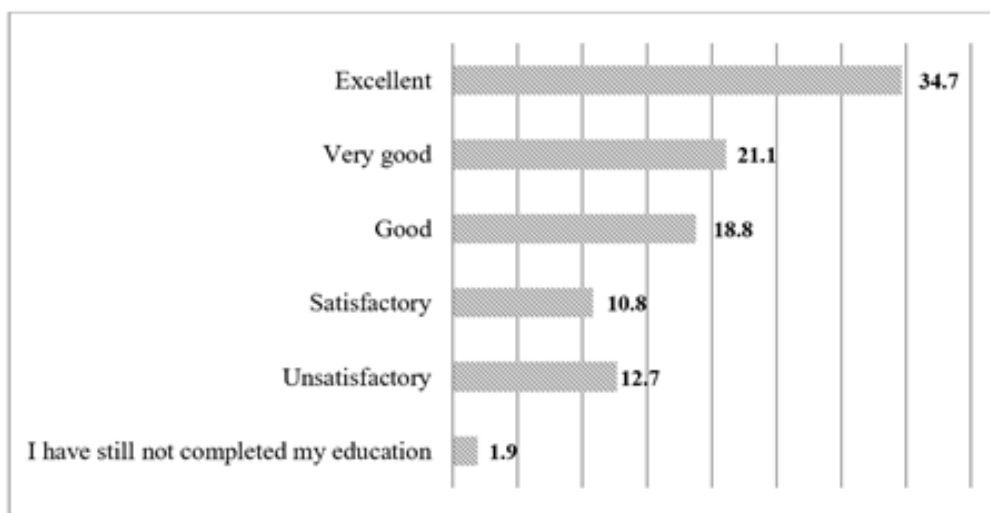
When it comes to the evaluation of the state (quality) of education in Serbia, the results confirm the initial hypothesis that in the highest grade would only be found in the smallest percentage (6.3%) (grade 5, excellent). That the state of education is very good (grade 4) was also the evaluation of a small percentage of the citizens (22.4%). Based on the opinions of

most interviewees (37.4%), the state of education in Serbia is good (grade 3). However, when we compare the results below and above the mid-range values (grade 3), we can note a greater prevalence of grades below it, indicating that the state of education is poor (exceptionally poor 10.0% and satisfactory 23.8%).

The accessibility of education was evaluated based on the equal/fair opportunities for one's own level of educational attainment and the equal/fair opportunities for the level of educational attainment of other citizens. The results of the evaluation from the point of view of the interviewees' own experience, that is, whether during their education the interviewees had equal/fair opportunities for their desired level of educational attainment, compared to the other people in their environment, are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

An Evaluation of the Accessibility of Education (the Existence of Equal/Fair Opportunities for the Desired Level of Educational Attainment) Based on Personal Experience (%)

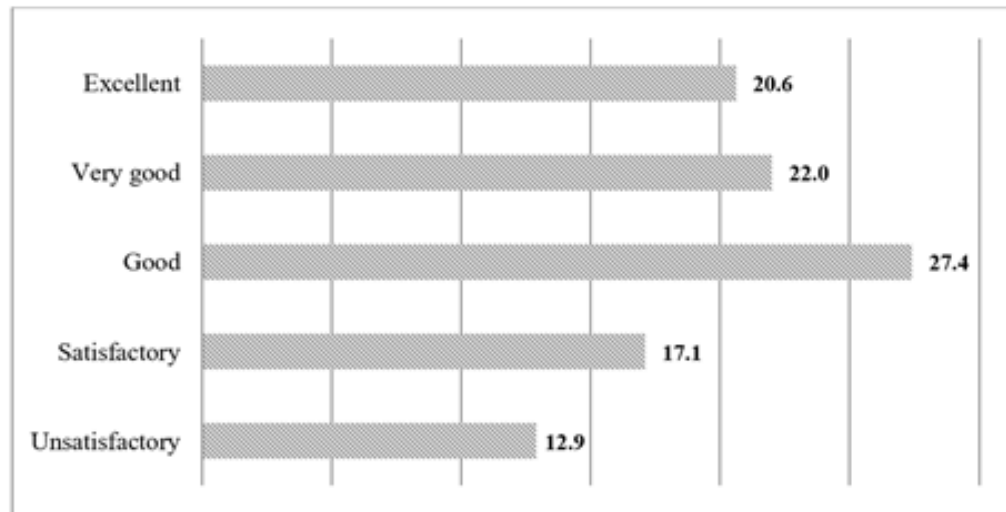


The evaluations of the interviewees based on their own experiences during education indicate that only one-third (34.7%) had completely equal/fair opportunities (grade 5, excellent) for the desired level of educational attainment. Based on the results above the mid-range point (grades very good and excellent), it could be noted that 55.8% of the interviewees confirmed that there were equal opportunities for the desired level of educational attainment, which indicates that almost every other interviewee in Serbia did not have these opportunities.

Figure 3 shows how the interviewees evaluated the accessibility of education, that is, the existence of equal/fair opportunities for their desired level of educational attainment for each citizen of Serbia.

Figure 3

The Evaluation of the Accessibility of Education (the Existence of Equal/Fair Opportunities for the Desired Level of Educational Attainment for Every Citizen of Serbia) (%)

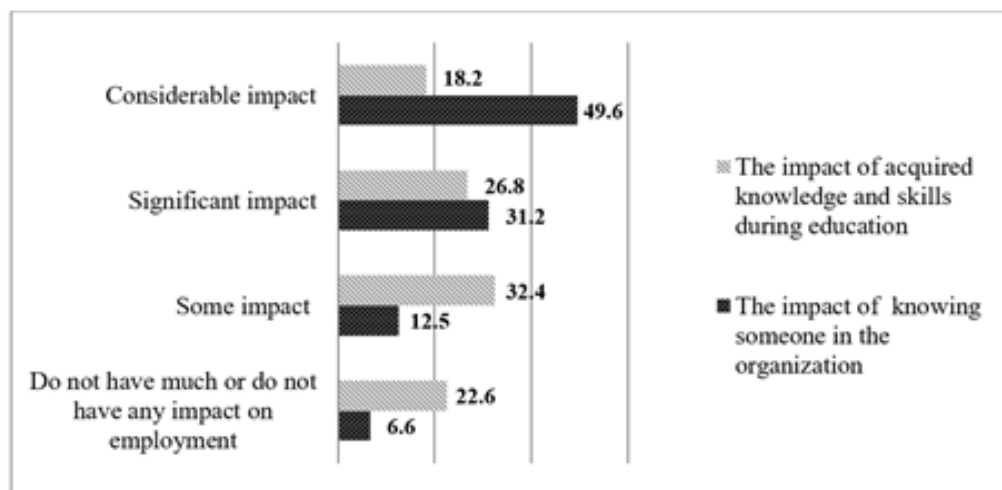


The distribution of the results is similar to that of the results of the evaluation of the opportunities of the people in our environment for attaining their desired level of education. Based on the evaluations of the interviewees, only 20.6% had completely (grade 5, excellent) equal/fair opportunities. In addition, an analysis of the results above the mid-range point (very good and excellent) indicates that less than one-half of the interviewees (42.6%) believe that other people had equal/fair opportunities during their education. It is noteworthy that the highest grade for the existence of equal/fair opportunities (grade 5, excellent) is more prevalent in the case of one's own personal experience, indicated by the interviewees stating that they had more positive experiences attaining their desired level of education compared to other people in Serbia. These findings can be the starting point for new socio-psychological studies of the perception of social inequality in education.

When it comes to the evaluation of the significance of education (knowledge acquired and skills developed during the course of education) for inclusion in the job market and for employment, the results (Figure 4) indicate that the smallest percentage of citizens believe that they have a considerable impact when seeking employment (18.2%), while 22.6% of the interviewees believe that knowledge and skills do not have much of an impact or that they do not have any impact on employment at all. A significantly greater percentage of interviewees stated that knowing someone in the organization of choice has considerable impact on employment (49.6%).

Figure 4

The Evaluation of the Impact that the Knowledge Acquired and Skills Developed or Knowing Someone in the Organization Have on the Decision of Who Will Be Given a Job in Serbia (%)



The aforementioned results confirm the initial hypotheses of the low prevalence of high grades for the state (quality) of education as a whole, the accessibility, and significance of education in Serbia.

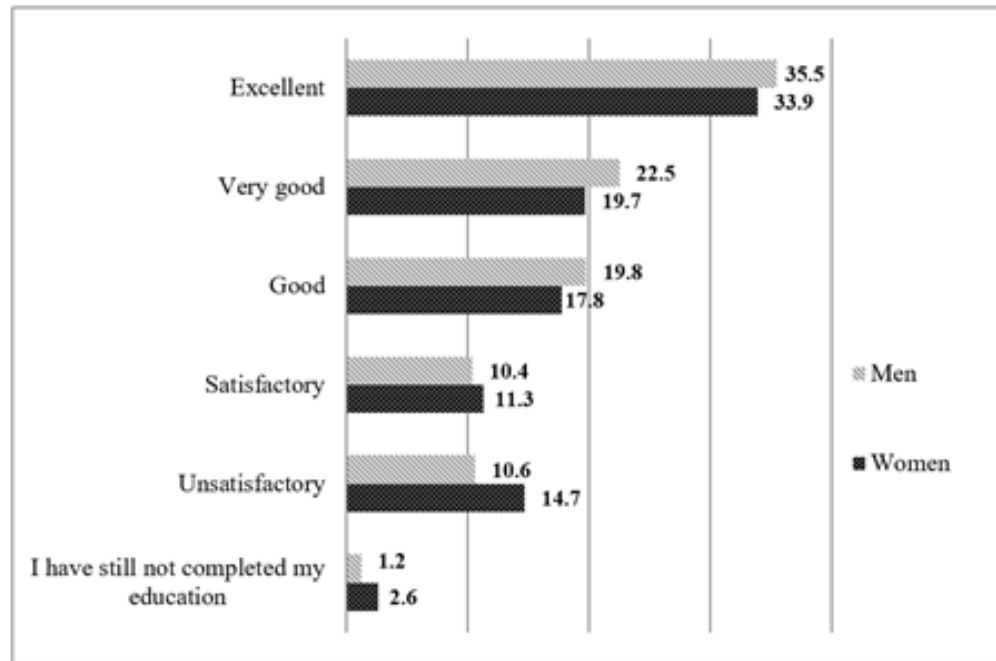
Socio-demographic Characteristics and the Evaluation of the State, Accessibility, and Significance of Education in Serbia

One of the aims of this paper was to determine the association between the socio-demographic characteristics of the interviewees (gender, age, level of educational attainment, type of job of the interviewee, regional belonging) and the evaluation of the state, accessibility, and significance of education in Serbia. The initial hypothesis was that the perception of education differed depending on these characteristics, that is, that there is a statistically significant association between certain socio-demographic characteristics of the interviewees and the evaluation of the state, accessibility, and significance of education.

The results indicate that, when it comes to gender, there are statistically significant differences ($\chi^2 = 14.94$, $df = 5$, $p = .01$) when evaluating the existence of equal/fair opportunities for attaining the desired level of education based on one's own experience (Figure 5), while when it comes to the evaluation of the state of education in Serbia, as well as the evaluation of the existence of opportunities for every citizen in Serbia for the desired level of educational attainment, there is no statistically significant association with gender.

Based on the findings, female interviewees consider that they did not have equal/fair opportunities for the desired level of educational attainment (equal/fair opportunities do not exist – 14.7%), as well as that equal/fair opportunities existed to a small extent (grade 2, satisfactory – 11.3%). On the other hand, the male interviewees gave grades of 3, 4 and 5 (good, 19.8%, very good 22.5% and excellent 35.5) to a greater extent than the female interviewees.

Figure 5
Evaluation of the Existence of Equal/Fair Opportunities for the Desired Level of Educational Attainment Based on Personal Experience / the Gender of the Interviewees (%)



When it comes to the age of the interviewees, the results indicate an interesting distribution of the responses when evaluating the state of education as a whole (Table 1).

Table 1
Evaluation of the State of Education in Serbia / the Age of the Interviewees (%)

Evaluation of the state of education in Serbia	The age of the interviewees							Total
	15–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65–74	75+	
1 – Unsatisfactory (exceptionally poor state)	9.6	8.7	14.3	11.6	10.5	8.0	7.1	10.1
2 – Satisfactory	22.9	31.6	31.2	28.0	22.5	18.3	13.3	23.8
3 – Good	41.4	34.0	36.1	36.0	39.5	36.9	38.7	37.4
4 – Very good	22.9	20.9	14.7	20.5	22.0	26.5	29.3	22.4
5 – Excellent (exceptionally well)	3.2	4.9	3.8	3.9	5.5	10.3	11.6	6.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

While the age groups 35–44 (14.3%) and 45–54 (11.6%) predominantly opted for grade 1 (unsatisfactory, exceptionally poor state), grade 2 (satisfactory) was predominantly the choice of the age group 25–34 (31.6%), more so than it was of the other groups. However, the most prevalent grade, grade 3 (good), was given by the youngest age group 15–24 (41.4%). And finally, the highest grades when evaluating the state of education in Serbia were given by the oldest age groups of interviewees. Grade 4 (very good) was given by the age group of 75 and over (29.3%) and the age group 65–74 (26.5%), while grade 5 (excellent, exceptionally well)

was given by the age group of 75 and over (11.6%) and the age group 65–74 (10.3%).

When it comes to association between the variable of age and the (non)existence of equal/fair opportunities for the desired level of educational attainment, the results indicate that there is a difference in the opinions of interviewees regarding whether each citizen of Serbia has an equal/fair opportunity for attaining the level of education they want (Table 2).

Table 2

Evaluation of the Accessibility of Education – the Existence of Equal/Just Opportunities for the Desired Level of Educational Attainment for Each Citizen of Serbia / Age of the Interviewees (%)

The opportunity for the desired level of educational	The age of the interviewees							Total
	15–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65–74	75+	
1 – Unsatisfactory (there are no equal/fair opportunities)	10.2	18.6	14.6	15.7	12.4	10.5	8.7	12.9
2 – Satisfactory	18.5	20.1	21.3	20.2	14.0	15.4	11.7	17.0
3 – Good	29.9	27.9	23.6	24.7	31.6	27.0	26.5	27.3
4 – Very good	26.8	18.1	22.1	23.2	21.2	22.6	20.9	22.0
5 – Excellent (there are completely equal/fair opportunities)	14.6	15.2	18.4	16.3	20.7	24.4	32.2	20.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

The findings confirm that age is a significant determinant of the perception of the (non) existence of equal/fair opportunities for the desired level of educational attainment in Serbia. Namely, most of the interviewees who consider that there are no equal/fair opportunities (grade 1) belong to the age group of 25–34 (18.6%), while the greatest prevalence of grade 2 (satisfactory) was determined among the age group of 35–44 (21.3%). Grade 3 (good) was mostly given by interviewees aged 55–64 (31.6%), while grade 4 (very good) was given by the youngest interviewees of 15–24 (26.8%). That there were completely equal/fair opportunities for the desired level of educational attainment (excellent) was confirmed by most of the oldest interviewees who belong to the age group of 75 and over (32.2%) and the age group 65–74 (24.4%).

The analysis of the results indicates that the evaluation of the state (quality) of education differs depending on the level of education of the interviewees ($\chi^2=1.50$, $df=20$, $p=.00$) and that interviewees with a lower level of education evaluated the state of education more positively (Table 3).

Table 3
Evaluation of the State (Quality) of Education / the Level of Education of the Interviewees (%)

Evaluation of the state (quality) of education	The level of education of the interviewees						Total
	No education and an incomplete primary education	Primary education	Secondary education and high school	Academic development after secondary education and high school	University or college education	Postgraduate studies (specialist degree, master's thesis, doctoral dissertation)	
1 – Unsatisfactory (exceptionally poor state)	11.9	6.9	10.5	11.3	12.5	4.3	10.1
2 – Satisfactory	8.2	16.7	23.8	29.8	37.0	38.6	23.8
3 – Good	34.0	34.1	38.6	40.5	37.0	34.3	37.3
4 – Very good	28.9	29.0	22.8	14.9	11.5	21.4	22.4
5 – Excellent (exceptionally well)	17.0	13.2	4.3	3.6	2.0	1.4	6.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Compared to the other interviewees, the greatest prevalence of grade 1 (exceptionally poor, unsatisfactory) was determined among the group of interviewees with a high level of education (12.5%), while grade 2 (satisfactory) was most prevalent among the interviewees who completed their post-graduate studies (specialist degree, master's thesis, doctoral dissertation) (38.6%). The average grade of 3 (good) was most prevalent among interviewees who had professional training after secondary school and those with a higher level of education (40.5%). The highest grades of 4 and 5, very good and excellent, were given by interviewees with a primary education (very good, 29.0%), without an education or with an incomplete primary education (excellent, 17.0%). Diagonally, an almost perfect distribution of grades from lower (1, 2) to higher (4, 5) is associated with a decline in the level of education of the interviewees, from high levels of education and postgraduate studies (1, 2) to lower levels of education (4, 5).

Table 4 shows the results for the differences which exist when evaluating the personal opportunities of the interviewees for the desired level of educational attainment based on their existing level of education ($\chi^2=4.34$, $df=25$, $p=.001$).

Table 4

Evaluation of the Availability of Education – the Existence of Equal/Just Opportunities of the Interviewee for the Desired Level of Educational Attainment / Level of Education of the Interviewees (%)

Evaluation of the existence of fair opportunities for the desired level of educational attainment	The level of education of the interviewees						Total
	No education and an incomplete primary education	Primary education	Secondary education and high school	Academic development after secondary education and high school	University or college education	Postgraduate studies (specialist degree, master's thesis, doctoral dissertation)	
1 – Unsatisfactory (there are no equal/fair opportunities)	40.5	25.9	8.2	5.3	2.0	-	12.7
2 – Satisfactory	24.3	15.9	10.4	2.4	3.9	2.8	10.9
3 – Good	17.3	18.4	22.1	13.6	12.7	4.2	18.7
4 – Very good	8.1	16.5	23.1	27.2	24.0	19.7	21.0
5 – Excellent (there are completely equal/fair opportunities)	8.7	21.2	33.8	51.5	56.4	73.2	34.8
I have still not completed my education	1.2	2.2	2.4	-	1.0	-	1.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Even when it comes to the accessibility of education, what is interesting is the distribution of the responses of the interviewees which indicate that in this case, as in the previous one, a pattern can be discerned. Namely, that there were no equal/fair opportunities for the desired level of educational attainment (grade 1, unsatisfactory) was confirmed mostly by interviewees with no education and an incomplete primary education (40.5%), while the highest grade of 5 (excellent, completely exists) was given by interviewees with the highest levels of educational attainment (specialist degree, master's thesis, and doctoral dissertation) (73.2%).

The findings that refer to the association between the type of job which the interviewee has and the evaluation of the state (quality) of education show that there is some difference in the answers. The results show that among the studied categories of (un)employment (a paid position; is attaining an education; unemployed, looking for work; unemployed, not seeking work; permanently ill or disabled; retired; does housework, takes care of children, etc.; other), the lowest grade 1 (unsatisfactory, exceptionally poor) was given by interviewees who are unemployed and seeking employment (9.7%), while the highest grade 5 (excellent, exceptionally good) was given for the state of education by pensioners (53.2%).

An analysis of the findings (Table 5) which refer to the evaluation of the accessibility of education also indicates that the interviewees differ in their evaluation of accessibility of education in relation to their job.

Table 5
Evaluation of the Availability of Education – the Existence of Equal/Just Opportunities of the Interviewee for the Desired Level of Educational Attainment/Job of the Interviewee (%)

The type of job of the interviewee	Evaluation of the accessibility of education (the existence of equal / fair opportunities for the desired level of educational attainment)						Total
	1 – Unsatisfactory, (there are no equal/fair opportunities)	2 - Satisfactory	3 - Good	4 – Very good	5 – Excellent, (there are completely equal/fair opportunities)	I have still not completed my education	
Gainful employment	15.0	22.8	37.0	43.3	38.5	18.9	34.2
Is getting an education	1.2	1.9	2.9	6.9	6.0	70.3	5.7
Unemployed, seeking employment	7.5	8.4	7.5	6.7	5.5	-	6.6
Unemployed, not seeking employment	4.0	5.6	4.8	3.1	4.6	2.7	4.3
Permanently ill or disabled	5.5	1.4	1.9	2.1	0.7	-	1.9
Retired	44.3	40.5	35.9	28.1	34.8	5.4	34.9
Housework, taking care of children, etc.	19.0	18.6	7.5	7.9	7.0	2.7	10.0
Other	3.6	0.9	2.4	1.9	2.9	-	2.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Compared to the other categories of interviewees, the highest grade 5 (excellent), that is, confirmation that they completely had equal/fair opportunities for the desired level of educational attainment was given by employed interviewees (who are currently working) (38.5%). On the other hand, the lowest grade of 1 (unsatisfactory, does not exist at all) was given by interviewees who are retired (44.3%), interviewees doing housework, taking care of children and the like (19.0%), as well as those permanently ill or disabled (5.5%).

When it comes to the regional belonging of the interviewees as the determinant of the evaluation of the state and accessibility of education, the results indicate that there are statistically significant differences among interviewees originating from various regions of Serbia (the Belgrade Region, Vojvodina Region, Šumadija Region, the Region of West Serbia, and the Region of South and East Serbia). What is interesting is that the lowest grades for the state (quality) of education of 1 and 2 (unsatisfactory and satisfactory), compared to the interviewees from other regions, were given by interviewees from the most developed Belgrade Region (12.3% and 32.0%), while grade 3 (good) was given by interviewees from the least developed Region of South and East Serbia (42.2%).

Discussion

The findings regarding the perceptions and evaluation of the state (quality) of education as a whole, the accessibility, and the significance of education in Serbia confirmed the hypothesis on the awareness of the citizens regarding the problems in education, considering that only 22.4% of the citizens rated the state in education as a whole as very good (grade 4), and 6.3% as excellent (grade 5). When it comes to the accessibility of education to the citizens of Serbia, the results indicated that based on personal experience of whether they had equal/fair

opportunities for the desired level of educational attainment, only 34.7% of the interviewees stated that they had completely equal/fair opportunities (grade 5, excellent). That there were equal/fair opportunities for each citizen of Serbia to attain their desired level of education (grade 5, excellent) was confirmed by only 20.6% of the interviewees. The results showed that, based on the grades given by the interviewees, education does have an impact when seeking employment, but that having a connection with someone who is already employed in the organization where one is seeking employment had the greatest impact on obtaining a job (as many as one-half of the interviewees included in the study considered such connections to have considerable significance).

The results of the analysis of the opinions held by citizens of Serbia regarding education, which was carried out four years earlier (2015)⁷, showed that most citizens did not see education as an important problem in Serbia, and were mostly preoccupied with existential issues such as unemployment and low living standards. Education as one of the most important problems was cited by a very small number of citizens, mostly those with a higher level of educational attainment, as well as citizens whose children were attending university. However, the fact that the citizens did not cite education as one of the most important problems in the country does not mean that they are not aware of the existing problems in the education system, or that they are satisfied. To the question of whether they are satisfied with the education system in Serbia, every other interviewee replied that they were not satisfied, and most of the dissatisfied individuals had a high level of educational attainment. When it comes to the shortcomings of education in Serbia, the interviewees mostly cited lack of practice, the poor quality of the educational program, lack of interest on the part of the teachers, and an extensive workload. The highest grades were given to primary education (two-thirds of the citizens included in the study evaluated this level of education with a positive grade), while secondary education was given the lowest grade. A noteworthy point is that highly educated interviewees gave the lowest grades to the education system on all levels, while those with a lower level of educational attainment provided more positive evaluations of the system of education in Serbia. These findings are congruent with the results of the state (quality) of education in Serbia from 2019 and indicate the necessity of implementing suitable measures to bring education in Serbia to a higher level.

When it comes to the significance of education (the impact of the knowledge acquired and skills developed for inclusion in the job market and employment), the results are similar to the findings of the aforementioned study from 2015. Based on the opinion of the interviewees regarding employment, a connection with someone who could sway an employer was also considerably important, while the knowledge acquired, and skills developed during education were of a lower significance (a university degree). On the other hand, in addition to the aforementioned shortcomings of the education system in Serbia, almost two-thirds of the interviewees pointed out that they believed that young people who graduated from university in Serbia were qualified to perform the tasks they were educated to do.

The *OECD Review of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Serbia* of the OECD and UNICEF showed that the attempts to raise education to a higher level were questionable due to the limited institutional capacities and low public expenditure on education (2020, p. 5). Even though the extent of the scope increased significantly, it differed based on socio-economic groups and regions. This referred to all the levels of education, and especially those that were not compulsory. For example, in 2008 only 7% of learners from the poorest families were attending preschool, as opposed to 64% of learners from more affluent households (Pešikan & Ivić, 2016; as cited in *The OECD Review*, 2020, p. 9). In addition, when it comes to achievements, PISA

⁷ The study was carried out on a sample of 1007 interviewees aged 18 and over in 67 municipalities, including urban, suburban, and rural environments, and was initiated and carried out by the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit (SIPRU) of the Government of the Republic of Serbia.

findings from 2018 indicated that in Serbia learners from more vulnerable families were behind their peers from wealthier families in terms of literacy by approximately two years (a difference of 73 points) (as cited in *The OECD Review*, 2020, p. 9).

In Serbia, like in some other countries in the region, there were geographical differences which were reflected in the fact that learners who lived in rural areas had a smaller opportunity of being included in the education process and of finishing school. For example, in 2013 the decline rate for attaining primary education in urban areas was 1%, and in rural areas was 14.25% (Pešikan, 2015). In addition, the achievements of learners in rural areas were lower. Learners attending schools in urban environments in Serbia had 122,3 points more on the PISA literacy test than students attending schools in rural areas. It is important to point out, when it comes to the education of the Roma, that children of the Roma nationality have a far smaller chance than other children of attending school, getting a higher education, and of making advancements in their education, especially if they live in poverty. In a study carried out by UNICEF it was determined that only 4.7% of children from the poorest families in the Roma settlements in Serbia attended secondary school, as opposed to the almost 40% of children who lived in more favorable socio-economic environments (*The OECD Review* 2020, p. 9, 10). This perpetuates the vicious cycle of reproduction of poverty and of children in poor families being denied the opportunity of developing their potential, which their peers from families with a higher socio-economic and educational status have. Therefore, investing in the education of children with a lower socio-economic status is not just a moral obligation, but an investment in their future and the development of all society. “Education is widely accepted as the main exit route from poverty. It is the backbone of growth and development of individuals and the nation. However, its achievement continues to elude many who are poverty stricken. This has perpetuated the vicious circle of poverty, it is most common in developing countries, particularly in rural areas, although pockets of poverty also exist in developed countries. Extreme poor are denied access to education, poverty hampers learning in developing countries through poor nutrition, health, home circumstances (lack of books, lighting, or places to do homework), access to education, quality, costs, and inadequate resources for education” (Julius & Bawane, 2011, p. 82). The lack of accessibility of education for children from poor families and unequal opportunities during the course of their education later hinder employment and make it impossible to earn a greater income. On the other hand, the social implications of such social inequality in education are greater social and health expenditure, the weakening of social cohesion, and the lack of possibility for sustainable economic and social development.

Based on the data from the *Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia*, the number of children in preschool educational institutions in Serbia increased from 2011 to 2018, but considerable regional differences were prevalent. The greatest scope was in the Region of Belgrade (65.9%), while it was considerably lower in the Region of South and East Serbia (47.1%). In the seven municipalities which belong to devastated areas, the scope was even smaller. Over this period there was an insignificant increase in the number of primary school institutions (from 1.113 to 1.132) and mostly in the urban settlements in the Region of Belgrade, while over the same period of time the number of four-grade primary schools decreased by 7.1% (from 2.354 to 2.187) in rural environments. In addition, we could also note a decrease in the number of learners over the same period, which was a consequence of the low birth rate, ageing of the population, and immigration due to unsatisfactory socio-economic circumstances. It could also be noted that a great number of young people in Serbia did not continue their education following the completion of their primary school education (the percentage of the population aged 18–24 with at most a primary school education was 16.9%), and that regional differences existed there as well. Based on the results of the last *Census of 2011*, more than one-sixth of young people did not continue their secondary education, and most of the young people among them were from rural environments (SORS, 2018).

Even though the reform of the education system in Serbia, following the stagnation in the social development at the end of the 20th century, also included a reorganization in terms of the democratization of educational activities (providing the opportunity for accessible education for everyone)⁸, the cited results indicated that more adequate and effective solutions were needed for the democratization of education in Serbia.

The second proposed hypothesis, that there is a difference in the evaluation of the state (quality) of education as a whole, the accessibility, and significance of education in Serbia depending on some of the socio-demographic characteristics of the interviewees (gender, age, level of educational attainment, the job of the interviewee, regional belonging), was also confirmed. Under the *Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System of the Republic of Serbia* (2021, article 3 and article 6) it is stated that the system of education must provide equal right and accessibility of education and pedagogy without discrimination and segregation based on gender, place of residence, material, or health status among others, for all children, learners, and adults. The *Act on the Prohibition of Discrimination* (2009) also cites discrimination in the field of education and professional development as a special form of inequality. Under this act everyone has the right to an education (preschool, primary, secondary, and high education), as well as to professional instruction under the same conditions. It is against the law to make it more difficult or impossible for an individual or a group of individuals to enroll in an educational institution based on one or more of their personal features, for them to be excluded from these institutions, and to make it difficult or impossible for them to attend class or take part in any other educational activities (article 19). *The Act on Gender Equality* (2009, article 30), among other things, states that educational and scientific institutions and institutions for professional education must not discriminate based on gender, especially when it comes to: the enrollment criteria and rejection criteria of an institution; the opportunity to access continued education, including all educational programs for adults and programs for functional literacy; assessment of knowledge and evaluation of the achieved results; the conditions for acquiring scholarships and other forms of assistance for education and study; the requirements for advancement or acquisition of a title, career focus, professional development and earning a degree; the requirements for advancement, further qualifications or requalification.

However, based on the findings of studies which were analyzed, females, compared to males, more often believed that they did not have fair opportunities for their desired level of educational attainment compared to other people. They confirmed the existence of certain inequalities in education which women perceived to a greater extent compared to men. Traditional norms which refer to the different relationships towards male and female children, where greater importance is ascribed to male children and their progress in various spheres of social life (education, employment, the economy), have been retained in Serbia to this day, so that women are faced with the gender differentiation of relationships from early childhood (a different attitude when bringing up male and female children, giving an advantage to male children). It is a well-known fact that during the 20th century, female children attended primary (compulsory), secondary and higher education institutions much less, and this occurrence was not frowned upon in the social environment, but was instead accepted and justified with reasons such as: their greater focus on household activities, taking care of children, food preparation, care for the elderly and the like. This is especially pronounced in rural environments, and among lower and more poor strata of society.

When it comes to the age of the interviewees and the evaluation of the state of education as a whole in Serbia, the distribution of responses could only be explained by the various experiences of the generations of interviewees and a critical approach to education. The middle generation (the generation of the parents, 35-54 years of age) encountered numerous problems

⁸ Starting from the academic 2010/2011 schoolyear, the inclusive approach has been used in the education system of Serbia.

during their education and employment at the crossroads between two centuries, at a time of intense social and economic turmoil (the inability to find employment, the transformation of the social system and the like), when the education system itself was caught up in big changes. Many of them faced the following question – what the purpose of an education is when the economic system “rejects” you and when you are unable to apply your knowledge in a practical sense. This is why their negative experiences can be viewed through the predominantly low grade (1, unsatisfactory), that is, the evaluation of education as exceptionally poor. On the other hand, grade 3 (good), was most prevalent among the youngest interviewees (15-24 years of age), which is understandable considering the fact that they were still learners, and still did not have enough experience and a clear perspective for evaluating the state of education. The oldest generation (the generation of the grandparents) when evaluating the state of education to the greatest extent, compared to the other age groups, gave the highest grades (4 and 5, very good and excellent). Considering the fact that they attended school during socialism and that after completing their education they were able to gain employment rather quickly, their perception and evaluation of the state of education, which at the time was a significant channel of social mobility which also denoted the possibility of better quality of life, did not change significantly to this day.

The results confirmed that age was a significant determinant in the evaluation of the (non)existence of equal/fair opportunities for the desired level of educational attainment in Serbia. They indicated that younger middle-aged and middle-aged interviewees were more critical in their evaluation of the opportunities for the desired level of educational attainment, and as a result were more rigorous when grading (a greater prevalence of lower grades, 1 and 2). This can in part be explained by the fact that during the education process, towards the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century, we were already facing various forms of social inequality in education (inequality at the onset of education, the inability to enroll in the desired school/university, and the like). However, the fact that the youngest interviewees to the greatest extent evaluated the chances for the desired level of educational attainment as very good, while the oldest interviewees evaluated it by giving an excellent grade, can be accounted for by the lack of experience of those who were still in school (the youngest interviewees), and the positive experience of the oldest interviewees who were educated during the 20th century (prior to the socialist transformation), when the system of education functioned differently than it does today. There were various measures available at the time (compensatory measures) for encouraging the education of children originating from the lowest levels of society (student loans were given mostly based on the evaluation of the social status of the family, and not based on academic success as they are today⁹). When it comes to the level of educational attainment, it could be concluded that there is a pattern, and that with the increase in the level of educational attainment, there is a decline in the evaluation of the state (quality) of education. This pattern can in part be explained by the more critical attitude of the highly educated interviewees regarding education, which is understandable considering the fact that they had more experience, that is, that they spent more time (almost two decades of their life) in the education system and saw some of its shortcomings from their personal perspective (the quality of the educational environment, the quality of the teaching/learning process, the quality of grading, the quality of knowledge of the learners/students). On the other hand, interviewees with no education or low levels of educational attainment (incomplete primary education and a primary education) did not have enough experience, gave up on furthering their education very early on (some did not even have the possibility of attending primary school, even though they might have wanted to), so their perception of education was in part the result of an idealization of something that was not accessible to them in their childhood and youth. These were, to the most part, elderly individuals originating from rural environments, of a lower social status, as well as members of the Roma population who were unable to go to school.

9 On the selection process for attaining the right to state aid in education see Mojić, 2012.

An explanation of the findings confirmed the initial hypotheses on the inaccessibility of education to certain social groups, whose end result was precisely giving up on education after primary (compulsory) education, or not taking part in the education process (interviewees with no education). Considering their limited family resources (economic, cultural, and educational capital), they were unable to get an education during their childhood, and so their attitude towards the lack of any equal/fair opportunities for education is understandable. On the other hand, among those who achieved the highest level of education, attitudes on the existence of equal/fair opportunities for education predominate. Therefore, thanks to their family resources, developed social networks, and encouraging family patterns, they were able to choose their educational path, that is, their educational aspirations were achieved, unlike those with a lower level of educational attainment who had no choice, and whose life and educational path were the results of limited family and social circumstances.

An association also exists between the type of job the interviewee has and the evaluation of the state (quality) of education as a whole, and the accessibility of education in Serbia. The distribution of the responses confirmed the initial hypotheses regarding the unequal opportunities for education for certain categories of the population. When it comes to personal experiences of equal/fair opportunities for educational attainment, what stands out is that those who were permanently ill or had a disability, were unemployed, or were individuals who do housework, take care of children or other individuals, as well as pensioners, predominantly gave the lowest grades. These grades indicated the impact of the social context on the possibility of education (pensioners), and that there were certain forms of inequality during their education, which was reflected in the process of inclusion in the job market (the permanently ill and invalids, the unemployed, individuals doing housework, taking care of children or other individuals). The initial hypothesis on regional differences based on the dichotomy of the developed north – undeveloped south, and therefore, the evaluation of the state (quality), accessibility, and significance of education (high grades from the regions which belong to the north of Serbia and the low grades from the regions which belong to the south of Serbia), was confirmed. The results indicated that the interviewees from developed regions of Serbia were considerably more critical of the state (quality) and accessibility of education in Serbia compared to the interviewees from less developed regions. The explanation for this pattern might be based on the lack of knowledge and broader perspective of the interviewees from economically less developed regions. They, to a greater extent, belong to the deprived social strata, which due to poverty did not have the opportunity to travel and see other regions and states, or to receive an education there. Considering the fact older people and people with a lower level of educational attainment live in these regions in greater numbers, compared to the more developed Belgrade and Vojvodina Region, their evaluation of the quality and accessibility of education in Serbia is understandable.

The noted problems indicated by the results could be used to further develop the theoretical-methodological approach for studying the quality of education in Serbia. On the other hand, they could contribute to determining the possibility of associating the results of the study with the practical solutions for the noted problems, that is, defining new directions and recommendations for improving the quality of education in Serbia since “a society can only be considered modern, advanced and developed if it possesses a high-quality education system, therefore education must be inarguably a ‘political priority’. [...] At the present time, it is also important to create mechanisms for the maximum improvement of education, besides contributing the necessary resources” (Bermejo & Góngora, 2009, p. 30).

Conclusions and Implications

The study of the quality and accessibility of education (facing problems and challenges) is of crucial importance for finding the possibilities for improving the democratization of education, which is one of the key factors for the development, prosperity, and modernization of society.

The results confirmed the initial hypotheses on the state (quality), accessibility, and significance of education and are congruent with the previous findings on the (non)equality of education and the opportunities that members of various social strata have for attaining an education. They indicate that Serbian society in the 21st century is still not “open” enough and that there are certain levels of education which are not accessible to all the members of society. The inaccessibility of educational opportunities and a low educational status can lead to social exclusion of an individual, the inability to perform social roles, or achieve economic wellbeing and economic independence. The significance of such findings is reflected in the fact that they could contribute to the broader social community being better informed on the questions and issues regarding quality of education, which could affect the readiness to work on finding their solutions.

With the aim of overcoming the noted shortcomings in education, further comparative quantitative and qualitative studies are needed to confirm the concrete problems and take on solving them by creating suitable social conditions for the improvement and modernization of the educational system both in Serbia and in other countries. The principle of the new philosophy of education of “education for all” is based on the assumptions that mass education provides society with the needed human resources, the needed human potential for the future and for development, and provides the individual with the possibility of assuming a more favorable social position.

Finding solutions to the problem of social inequality in education requires a permanent evaluation of the quality of education, since legal provisions are not sufficient to enable better accessibility and more fairness in education, and instead certain measures and activities are needed for them to be realized successfully in practice. In that sense, it is necessary: a) to promote and support scientific research in the area of education as a high priority and to motivate researchers to focus on this kind of research in greater numbers, and b) to use the results of these studies when formulating educational policies and recommendations for the improvement of the quality of education, taking into consideration the experiences of other countries as well.

With the aim of democratizing education, it is necessary to create favorable circumstances for the improvement of the position of vulnerable categories in education (the Roma, people with disability, the rural population, women in particular) and to prevent them leaving formal education at an early age. A low level of educational attainment, on the one hand, decreases the chances for inclusion in the job market and for employment which leads to poverty, which is transferred generationally, while on the other hand, it increases the risk for the emergence of violence in the family and in partner relationships. Accordingly, it is necessary to introduce changes into the legal framework and to reformulate the measures of protection for vulnerable categories of the population which would facilitate, primarily, their access to higher education, and thus contribute to their greater prevalence in the student population. Changes are also necessary when it comes to the basic criteria for obtaining benefits (tuition, housing, food, scholarships, loans), where in addition to educational success, which now has priority, a significant criterion would also be, first and foremost, the socio-economic status of the family.

In order to achieve a greater accessibility of education and increase the educational attainment level of the entire population, it is necessary for each citizen to have equal access to all the levels and types of education, in accordance with their personal needs and interests. This would enable each individual to develop their abilities and skills irrespective of the socio-

economic conditions and cultural-educational capital of the family.

Therefore, in order for the effects of the democratization of education to increase, a global reform of society is needed, one which requires an organized democratic state, developed economy, and a greater investment in education on the part of the state which would contribute to greater social mobility. This would create more favorable conditions for the improvement of quality and the modernization of education on all levels, and the harmonization of systems of education in Serbia with European principles and values.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no competing interest.

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