

## BRANKO BABIĆ<sup>1</sup> | STUDYING AND STRESS

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**Abstract:** *During November and December of 2011, a research concerning the stress among the students of the Higher Educational Technical School of Professional Studies in Novi Sad has been conducted, as well as the influence the stress has on their university studying. The research sample consisted of the second and the third year students of all departments, while the first year students presented the control group. The obtained results have partially been given in the paper: only those needed to present the main results are included. The research goal was to view the accurate state of the students during the time they spend at the university, to reach the information whether the stress has an influence on the quality of university studying and to find a more effective studying model (if possible), eliminating the stress as one of the main factors of failures at the university level.*

**Key words:** research, stress, students.

### INTRODUCTION

Most people in the modern world live under a lot of stress which, if it takes too long or becomes too overbearing, leads to the development of mental and physical diseases. The faster – modern – tempo of life and numerous activities that it imposes and that have to be done, mostly in a short period of time, under a deadline, enforce constant presence of concern, irritability and anxiety. Only in rare moments can people afford to rest, be calm and relaxed.

The phenomenon of stress and its researches are recent. It is considered to be one of the largest causes of many organisational problems, heart and arteries diseases, as well as mental diseases. In the Republic of Serbia, a number of physical disorders caused by stress is rising, and they are a consequence of the past wars, hyperinflation, sanctions, NATO bombing, social transition, financial crisis and high unemployment rate. The results conducted by the experts from the Institute of Public Health of Serbia “Dr Milan Jovanović Batut” point to that. There were 271.944 cases of mental illnesses in the Republic of Serbia in 1999, while that number rose to 309.281 by 2002. The mental health of the citizens of the Republic of Serbia is worsening – stress is one of the causes and it has been noticed that every fourth citizen suffers from depression.

Stress is an overall reaction of the body to any demand from the environment, made in order to adjust to the changed conditions. It is a complex phenomenon and we see its sources, characteristics and mode of actions on a daily basis.

Stress is one of the most serious problems in modern organisations, including the educational ones. It is a consequence of the body's general response to a situation that includes special demands – both physical and psychological. Stress factors are the outside actions that are out of control, and they appear as a consequence of constant and frequent changes, faster life tempo, and fierceness of the competition, higher

uncertainty and insecurity at work. Stress has become an integral part of a modern life and work, and it affects health, physical balance and performance of work tasks in a negative way.

The process of studying at a university level carries a lot of stressful situations, and, disregarding personal resistance, it cannot always be avoided. The time of studying is, among other sources, a significant source of stress. Most importantly, stress is connected to the environment and conditions in which the process of education takes place, such as fulfilling the conditions for enrolling into the following year, receiving good grades, fear of failure, fear of facing the parents due to poor results and fear of losing the funding which is granted by the state budget. During studying, the students are, wishing to fulfil all conditions, exposed to personal, material and health problems that affect their behaviour and health and, therefore, the appearance of stress.

### Some researches on stress

“Stress is the spice of life” is a famous quote by Hans Selye, a psychologist who conducted a detailed research on this topic. Although we can accept this to be true, it is necessary to take the other side of the story, i.e. the negative consequences of (especially long-term) stress, in consideration.

Stress is useful when it is a momentary reaction of the body. It is an adaptive reaction developed during the course of filogenetic evolution. Its purpose is (was) to save an individual in a life-threatening situation. Rapid mobilisation of strength enabled escape or fight. We often hear of people who work well under pressure. Similar to that are “healthy jitters” before an exam. These statements have their justification in the nature of the processes that take place in a body at that time. Secretion of adrenalin and other physiological mechanisms help us be more efficient in a given situation. However, body's reserves are not unlimited!

The Institute of Public Health of Serbia “Dr Milan Jovanović Batut” [1] conducted a research on stress in Serbia in November 2004, and it showed that 37% of the population in Serbia is under constant stress. A significant number of students claimed that the exam periods are the most stressful, and pointed out that tranquilizers, mostly Benzedrine, are the way to cope with stress.

The researches conducted by The Medical Faculty in Belgrade [2] have confirmed the rise of the number of students who suffer from cardiovascular diseases and cancer. During physical examinations, it was also noticed that more and more students suffer from allergies. The main reason for this, according to the experts, is stress which is “more expressed and ruinous with students.” Because of that, the experts express the importance of healthy food, physical activities, avoiding drugs, good communication and general hygiene.

A research conducted on six British universities showed that students have better results if their hearts are working faster. The most successful students had 23.9 heart beats above average while doing their tests, whereas those who had the lowest scores had only 3.9 heart beats above average. The higher number of heart beats is more connected to the increased attention than to nerve tension. Susan Chamberlain, the head of the research team, said: “The increase of the number of heart beats is a sign of enhanced excitement in students, which encourages them to show their best abilities.” The experts, however, do not recommend using stimuli, such as energetic drinks, which would increase the number of heart beats.

The negative effects of life highly correlate to the risk towards “professional burnout” which, according to the authors of Mayo Clinic [3], affects 45% of medical students from three medical schools in Minnesota and certainly alters the quality of their lives. Researches on the effects of stress on the students of other schools (future dentists and nurses) show the identical negative effects on their psychological and physical health and welfare. The research notices that the intensity of negative stress effects on health is constantly rising with the students of both sexes during the years spent in medical school, which emphasizes the importance of introducing management stress topics in the curriculum of medical schools even more. In that way future medical professionals could learn how to help themselves first, and then their patients, avoid harmful effects of stress on health. Presence of sex differences in the perception of stress, higher level of perception of stress and posttraumatic stress symptoms have been expressed by female students as opposed to male, but also by female population in general, which means that sex differences are not specific for female medical students only.

## **Methodological approach to the research**

The main reason for conducting the research on stress and its effect on studying in the Higher Educational Technical School of Professional Studies in Novi Sad was to reach relevant indicators and determine how much stress affects both an individual and groups (in departments), what the main indicators of stress are, whether they can be partially or fully eliminated and how to elevate the fulfilment of the students and the quality of their studies.

The second reason for the research was the fact that this kind of research is rare and the results cannot be easily reached.

## **Problem formulation**

The problem of the research is stress which appears during studying at the university level, from enrolling to graduating, in all phases and periods

Research goal:

- Determining if the students of the Higher Educational Technical School of Professional Studies in Novi Sad are under stress.

General research goals:

- To test if the students are under stress;
- To test how much stress affects their process of studying, work productivity and achieving better or worse results.

Specific research goals:

- To determine which period of studying is the most stressful;
- To determine if sex affects stress appearance and manifestation;
- To determine if difference between places of birth and studying is connected to stress appearance.

Research hypotheses:

- General hypothesis – “Students are under stress and it affects their studying significantly”;
- Specific hypotheses – the most stressful period is taking exams; change of place of living affects a lot of students

Variables:

- Variable 1 - stress during studying (for the purpose of research, we will question only people who attend university on a regular basis, and received results will be compared to the control group);
- Variable 2 - gender: two categories, male and female;
- Variable 3 - year of study at a college.

A method of scientific research, poll and survey have been used as research methods. The poll is anonymous. The survey consists of twenty-seven questions that are both multiple choice and fill-in questions. We expected honest answers and constructive suggestions so that the school management could reduce stress level in students.

Research sample: The sample consists of the second and third-year students (students who enrolled into the

respected year for the first or second time) of all departments of the Higher Educational Technical School of Professional Studies in Novi Sad (see table 1). The control group consisted of first-year students of Safety Engineering. The sample consists of 420 students, 75.48% of which are male students and 24.52% are female.

The research includes 420 students - 196 second-year students, 138 third-year students and 86 first-year students (control group) of the Higher Educational Technical School of Professional Studies in Novi Sad (see Table 1). Out of the whole number of students, there were 56.8% of second-year students, 27.7% of third-year students and 19,1% of first-year students.

**Table 1.** Overview of school's population and research sample according to departments

Department	Study group	Second-year students			Third-year students			Control group (First-year students)		
		Popu lation	Sam ple	%	Popu lation	Sam ple	%	Popu lation	Sam ple	%
Mechanical Engineering	Production Engineering	20	8	40	24	1	4.2		9	
	Termoenergy and Maintenance	15		0	21	6	28.6		5	
Graphic Engineering and Design	Web Design	35	11	31.4	45	8	17.8			
	Graphic Design	38	14	36.8	48	25	52.1			
	Applied Photography	15	11	73.3	23	10	43.5			
	Graphic Engineering	4		0	24	3	12.5			
Safety Engineering	Occupational Safety and Health	28	28	100	26	6	23.1		26	
	Environmental Safety	27	27	100	48	19	45.8		19	
	Civil Protection and Emergency Rescue	4	4	100	7	3	71.4		10	
	Fire Protection	23	18	78.3	55	17	30.9		17	
Electrical and Computer Engineering	Informational Technology	82	39	47.6	89	1	1.1			
	Electroenergetics	39	31	79.5	76	33	43.4			
	E-Business	15	5	33.3	13	6	46.2			
TOTAL		345	196	56.8%	499	138	27.7%		86	19.1%

## WORK METHODS

The research was conducted between 5<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> September 2011 with consent from the Schools management. The students filled in the survey about stress before the start of their classes when most of them were present and rested, with consent from their professors who were also present during the survey. The researcher had previously explained to the students the purpose and the significance of the survey, clarified that their participation is voluntary and that they had the option to answer the questions or not, that their anonymity was guaranteed, as well as the confidentiality of the data which would be used in scientific and research purposes only. The students' interest in participating in the research was high, so a very small number of questions remained unanswered. Filling in the survey lasted for about fifteen minutes.

The students who were absent that day did not have an opportunity to fill in the survey later. A different number of students participated in collecting data, from five to thirty-five per group. The survey was completely filled in by 404 students, while sixteen surveys (3.8%) remained uncompleted (twenty-five questions remained unanswered, which is 0.07% of the whole number of answers for all students). This did not have any substantial impact on the final results taken into analysis in the present, uncompleted, condition.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The surveys were filled by 420 students, while 404 of them (99.9%) filled it completely.

The research sample consisted of 317 male (75.48%) and 103 female students (24.52%), which is in accordance with the percentage domination of male students – see Table 2.

128 students came from urban area (30.47%), while 292 students (69.53%) came from rural areas or smaller town – see Table 3 which also shows the ratio of male to female population in the research sample.

25.7% of research sample are first-year students who have just enrolled into school and were born in 1991 (see Table 2).

There are fifty-six students (13.33%) of both sexes (forty-three male and thirteen female students) who have enrolled in their respected years of study for the second time after originally failing them – thirty-four of those are second-year students (71% are male students), while twenty-two are third-year students (86.3% are male students). For clarification, see Table 4.

**Table 2.** Overview of the research sample according to the year of birth and sex

Year of birth / Sex	'68	'73	'76	'77	'80	'81	'82	'83	'84	'85	'86	'87	'88	'89	'90	'91	'92	'93	Total
Male		2	1	2		5	2	2	2	5	5	14	35	44	70	86	32	10	317
Female	1				2		1	1	2	2	2	4	9	13	29	22	13	2	103

**Table 3.** Male to female ratio of the research sample according to the place of living

Sex	Live and attend university in the city	%	Came from rural area or smaller town	%	Total number of students
Male	87	27,40%	230	72,60%	317
	68%		78,70%		
Female	41	39,80%	62	60,20%	103
	32%		22,30%		
Total	128	30,47%	292	69,53%	420
	100%		100%		

**Table 4.** Overview of studying process by year of college and population

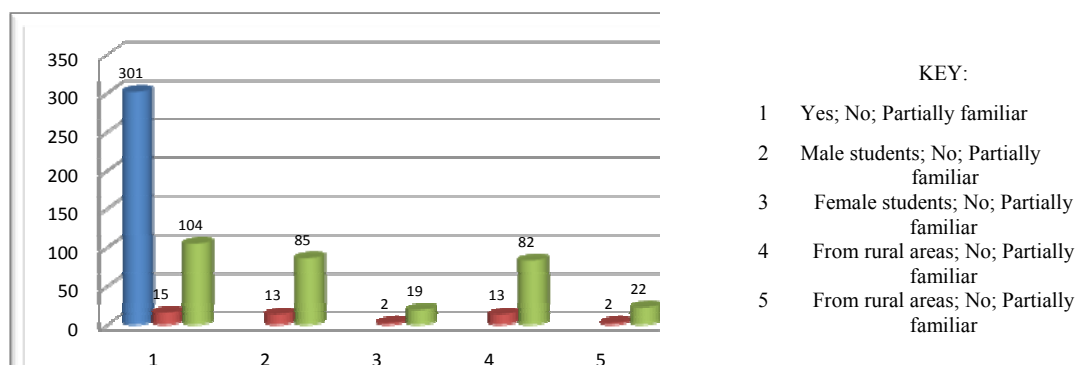
	Second-year students		Third-year students		Control group		TOTAL	
Male population	153	48,30%	101	31,90%	19,80%	63	254	317
%	100%		100%				100%	
First time enrolled	129	61,10%	82	38,90%			211	211
%	84,30%		81,20%				83,10%	
Second time enrolled	24	55,80%	19	44,20%			43	43
%	15,7		18,80%				16,90%	
Female population	43	41,70%	37	35,90%	22,30%	23	80	103
%	100%		100%				100%	
First time enrolled	33	49,30%	34	50,70%			67	67
%	76,70%		91,90%				84%	
Second time enrolled	10	77%	3	23%			13	13
%	23,3%		8,10%				16%	

**Table 5.** Overview of studying process by year of college, population and place of birth

Sex, enrollment time, number and percentage				Second-year students				Third-year students			
				Urban area		Rural area		Urban area		Rural area	
Male population	total	317	100,00%	55	17,30%	161	50,80%	32	10,10%	69	21,70%
	%	100%		100%		100%		100%		100%	
First time enrolled	total	211	100,00%	30	14,20%	99	46,90%	23	10,90%	59	30%
%	%	66,60%		54,55%		61,49%		71,88%		85,51%	
Second time enrolled	total	43	100,00%	7	16,30%	17	39,50%	9	20,90%	10	23,30%
%	%	13,60%		12,73%		10,56%		28,13%		14,49%	
Control group	total	63	100,00%	18	28,60%	45	71,4%				
%	%	19,80%		32,73%		27,95%					
Female population	total	103	100,00%	22	21,35%	44	42,7%	19	18,40%	18	17,50%
	%	100%		100%		100%		100%		100%	
First time enrolled	total	67	100,00%	14	20,9%	19	28,3%	16	23,90%	18	26,90%
%	%	65,00%		63,64%		43,18%		84,21%		100,00%	
Second time enrolled	total	13	100%	3	23,1%	7	53,8%	3	23,10%		
%	%	12,60%		13,64%		15,91%		15,79%			
Control group	total	23		5	21,70%	18	78,3%				
%	%	22,40%		22,73%		40,91%					

71.7% of students are familiar with the term “stress,” 0.35% are not (thirteen male and two female students), while 24.76% are partially familiar with it (eighty-five male and nineteen female students). Students who

come from rural areas (when talking about geographical background) are less familiar with the term “stress” (thirteen students, or 87% of the total number).



**Graph 1.** Familiarity with the term “stress” when talking about sex and geographical background

According to the survey, stress does not have a negative effect on the studying process in 7.45% of students; it slightly affects 45.67% of students, whereas 47.4% of students report that stress has a negative effect on the quality of their studying process and that it is the reason for their failing exams.

Concerning the main causes of stress, 338 students (78.8%) reported one of the following causes: the level of difficulty and the demands of the studies (29.6%), conflicts with their peers (0.03%), conflicts with professors (3.92%), causes not related to studying (25.38%), personal ambitions (13.59%), pressure from the environment (7.85%) and miscellaneous (19.33%). Sixty-five students (15.5%) report two causes of stress, twenty students (4.7%) report three causes, while three students (0.7%) report four causes of stress.

Stress manifests in one appearance with 67.8% of students. There is anxiety (49.1%), disinterest in the surroundings (8.4%) and miscellaneous (17.9%). 135 students report more than one appearances of stress – from two to four. Most of the students (253) manifest stress as a more serious sense of nervousness (60.2%), ninety-seven students have headache (23.1%); seventy-three students become disinterested in their surroundings (17.4%), while stress manifests as some other medical problems with only thirty-nine students (9.3%).

Stress is the most intense during the exam period (58.8%), at the end of the school year (15.5%) and during “boring classes they have to attend” (14.2%).

During the exam period, the most stressful periods are the day of the exam (29.9%), during studying for the exam (25.2%), awaiting results (24.1%) and the day before the exam (20.8%).

50.2% of students are under stress during the exam period only when they take hard exams, 27.6% of students are under stress always, no matter how hard the exam is, while 15.5% of students are under stress only when they had not studied.

Students cope with stress in various ways: 67.14% of them report one way of coping and, among those, the predominant ones are physical activities (34.04%), hobbies (26.95%) and going out with friends (26.95%), while 29.7% of students report all three ways of coping

as one unique way. In addition to given choices, students wrote down some of their mechanisms for fighting stress: “I use the same path to school as the one I used when I passed an exam,” “enough sleep,” “coffee,” “good, strong breakfast,” “eating seeds,” “skating,” “sleeping for two or three days,” “alcohol,” “praying to God,” “homemade rakija,” “a shot of alcohol before an exam,” “party,” “meditating,” “smoking cigarettes and drinking beer,” “yoga,” “making a schedule,” “listening to music while taking a break,” “sex,” “visiting church,” “literature,” “going out, getting drunk, have a good time,” “putting on clothes backwards,” “rituals,” “nature and its goods,” “studying as a part of a study group,” “washing my face often,” “drinking,” “lighting candles,” “new tattoo or piercing,” “watching a film,” “styling my hair,” “polishing my nails,” “cleaning my apartment,” “lying in bed,” and so on.

Students who come from a village or a smaller town (69.53%) think that their relocation does not affect their studying process or their attitude towards it significantly. Relocation affects 18.5% of those students, 30.8% of them are not sure if it affects them, while 50.6% do not think that relocation affects them.

Despite high demands of the process of studying and financial possibilities, 24.52% of students can handle the studying well. 53.33% of students handle it in a satisfying way, while 22.14% handle it poorly. The majority of students who are in a worse financial situation are those who relocated to the city (61.3%) and, among those, most of them are male students (84.21%).

70.71% of students do not work, so that affects the quality of their studying as they depend on their parents who are in a less favourable financial situation.

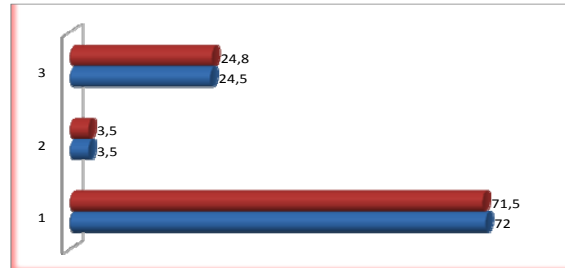
When the results from second and third-year students were analysed and compared to the results from the control group (first-year students), the following has been received:

1. Considering the familiarity with the term “stress” (see graph 2): the received results are almost the same, which indicates that there is no difference between first-year students and older students. Over 70% of students are familiar with the term “stress.”

2. Effects of stress on the quality of studying (see graph 3). Both groups are under stress (more or less), while the older students are under more stress than first-year students.
3. Main causes of stress (see graph 4) are the most obvious when considering the demands of the

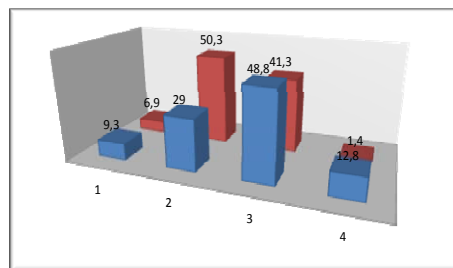
process of studying and personal problems that are not related to studying, but have an impact.

4. When is stress the most intense (see graph 5)? During the exam period and at the end of school year.



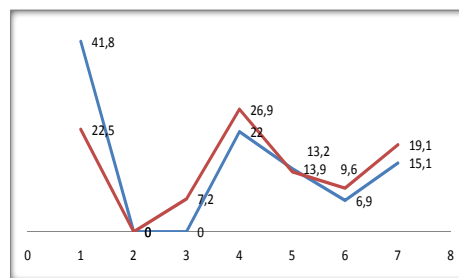
**Graph 2.** Familiarity with the term “stress”: control group (blue) and second and third-year students (red)

Key: 1 – familiar with the term; 2 – not familiar with the term; 3 – partially familiar with the term



**Graph 3.** Effect of stress on the quality of studying: control group (blue) and second and third-year students (red)

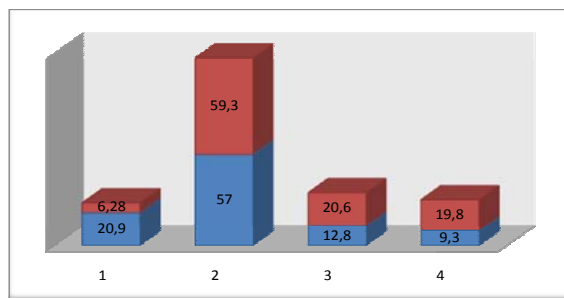
Key: 1 – does not affect; 2 – affects slightly; 3 – affects a lot; 4 – I fail exams due to stress



**Graph 4.** Causes of stress: control group (blue) and second and third-year students (red)

Key: 1 – the level of difficulty and demands of the studies; 2 – conflicts with peers; 3 – conflicts with professors; 4 – causes not related to studying; 5 – personal ambitions; 6 – pressure from the environment; 7 – miscellaneous





**Graph 5.** intensity of stress: control group (blue) and second and third-year students (red)

Key: 1 - at the beginning of semester; 2 - during the exam period; 3 - at the end of school year; 4 - during “boring classes”

48.8% of students feel tired during their day; 29.4% of students have problems relaxing after classes, in the evenings and at weekends; 16.5% of students drink more alcohol than before in order to relax; 23.9% of students have problems falling asleep and wake up in the middle of the night; 41.3% of students cannot concentrate and get distracted during classes; 52.5% of students feel overloaded and think that “something is constantly hanging over their head”; 52.6% of students are irritable when something is not according to their plans and expectations; 22.1% of students have gastric problems, headaches and faster heartbeats; 8.1% of students often feel as professors' victims; 13.5% of students are annoyed with phone ringing more than before; 10.1% of students become detached from their friends and avoid public conflicts; 28.3% of students feel old and like carrying a giant burden on their backs; 20.1% of students are often aggressive towards other students; 14.9% of students feel that they will lose control over themselves and their behaviour.

## CONCLUSION

Attending university and studying are stressful because they are a part of life – a transitional part of life of any student. It is a period of transition to adulthood and a continuation of the processes started in puberty. Every segment of this process gives different causes for stress. First-year students must get used to more responsibilities and independence, have to adapt to new environment and learn new ways of working at a university level. During their final years, the students worry about finding a job after graduating, and there is more pressure from their environment concerning the number of exams yet to be passed and the date of the graduation. Many stress factors are out of students' reach. This leads to the feeling of helplessness, which closes the cycle – the level of stress is constantly rising, the reactions are inadequate, the responsibilities keep piling up, the control is lost, and so on.

General research goal was to determine if the students are under stress and how much it affects their studying

process and productivity. Based on the obtained and processed results, it can be concluded that:

- 27.3% of students are under stress and it has a negative effect on the quality of their studies;
- Stress significantly affects the quality of studies and achieving good results with 47.4% of students;
- Requirements and difficulty level have a negative effect and cause stress with 29.6% of students;
- 49.1% of students express their stress through nervous behaviour.

Specific research aims were to determine which period of studying is the most stressful, if gender affects stress appearance and manifestation and if the difference between places of birth and studying is connected to stress appearance. The results show that:

- Stress is the most prominent during the exam period with 58.8% of students;
- Gender does not affect stress manifestation, but it is evident that: female students suffer from more stress (51.4% as opposed to 41% of male students), the most stressful day is the actual day of the exam (39.8% as opposed to 24.6% of male students). Male students find that they are most stressful while awaiting results (26.7% as opposed to 18.5% of female students) and studying for exams (25.9% as opposed to 20.4% of male students);
- 69.53% of students who come from rural areas or smaller town think that the relocation does not affect the quality of their studies and attitude towards studying; 18.5% of them think that the relocation affects them; 30.8% remain uncertain.

The results of the analysis of stress impact on the students who enrolled the same year again (13.3%) show that there are no major differences in the impact of stress.

In the end, it should be emphasised that all students must be true to themselves and assess their advantages and disadvantages in order to prepare for stressful situations that await them during the course of studying at a university level. Stress is a part of life and it is better to welcome it prepared. That is why it is

important to try to predict situations that carry stress and find possible solutions for overcoming it. Stress cannot be avoided, and it is essential to find good ways of overcoming it.

Educational management is based on specific characteristics of education as a social process. The goal of that management is to enhance work efficiency and, hence, the knowledge will increase. Student care, their knowledge, creativity and expertise are extremely important for overcoming stress. Experts and educated students are invaluable asset that can enhance the value of not only the Higher Educational Technical School of Professional Studies in Novi Sad, but the society in general.

A long time ago, the management of School realised that investing in human resources is a necessary condition of existence in a more competitive economy. By investing in the education of its employees and students, the School achieves complete success not only in the field of fulfilling business strategy, but also in including it in the widest social framework.

In order to provide assistance to students, overcome stress and achieve better results during their education, the management of the School conducted a series of educational measures, including the following advice:

- Allow yourselves not to be perfect – do not think in terms of what you “should” and “must” do, since that kind of thinking only elevates the level of tension and lowers students’ possibilities to be efficient. You should be true to yourselves and assess your advantages and disadvantages realistically;
- You should prioritise, make a list of the most important goals and try to accomplish them. In that way, you will make enough time and be able to calmly dedicate yourselves to other duties.
- You should make time for yourselves even with all your duties – exams, seminar papers, etc. – and

spend at least an hour a day relaxing by reading, jogging, socialising, etc.

- You should be prepared for stressful moments – stress is a part of life – and it is better to welcome it prepared. That is why you should try to predict stressful situations and prepare possible solutions for overcoming them.

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## BIOGRAPHY

**Branko Babić** graduated and earned his MA and PhD from the University of Belgrade. He is currently working as a Professor at the Higher Educational School of Professional Studies in Novi Sad. His work consists of seven monographs and over thirty



bibliographical items: papers in scientific and professional journals, as well as proceedings in scientific and professional conferences on the system of civil defense, civil protection, emergency situations stress and mobbing, place and role of civil forces in the system of defense. His research interests include: emergency situations, mobbing and stress, population education, etc.

## STUDIRANJE I STRES

### Branko Babić

**Rezime:** Tokom novembra i decembra 2011. godine sprovedeno je istraživanje stresa kod studenata Visoke tehničke škole strukovnih studija u Novom Sadu i uticaj na tok studiranja. Uzorak istraživanja su predstavljali studenti druge i treće godine svih studijskih programa, dok su studenti prve godine predstavljali kontrolnu grupu. Dobijeni rezultati istraživanja se delimično prikazani u radu, samo u obimu koji je potreban za prezentovanje osnovnih rezultata. Cilj istraživanja je bio da se sagleda realno stanje u kome se nalaze studenti tokom studiranja, da se dođe do podataka da li stres ima uticaja na kvalitet studiranja i da se pronađe efikasniji model studiranja (ukoliko je to moguće) eliminišući stres kao jedan od glavnih faktora neuspeha na studijama.

**Ključne reči:** istraživanje, stres, studenti.