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Challenges and prospects for the application of scientific research methodology in higher education in the Republic of Serbia

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Abstract

The methodology of scientific research represents the foundation for developing scientific reasoning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills among students and academic staff. In the context of the Republic of Serbia, higher education is undergoing a period of transformation influenced by European integration processes, digitalization, and labor market demands. This paper identifies key challenges in the implementation of research methodology in higher education institutions, including inconsistencies in course content across faculties, a lack of practical research activities, weak linkage between theory and practice, and limited research resources. The empirical study, conducted between October 2024 and May 2025, involved both faculty members and students from the universities of Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, Kragujevac, Novi Pazar, and Kosovska Mitrovica. Results indicate that 80% of respondents support the introduction of project-based learning, while 75% recognize the importance of digitalization and software tools for data analysis. Proposed improvement perspectives include curriculum reform, strengthening of teaching competencies, institutional support, and international cooperation through programs such as Erasmus+.

Keywords: methodology, scientific research, higher education, Republic of Serbia, reform

1. Introduction

The methodology of scientific research represents the foundation of modern higher education, as it enables students and academic staff to develop analytical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and critical understanding of reality (Bjelica, 2019). In today's education environment, which is focused on competencies and learning outcomes, mastering research methodology not only contributes to individual academic development but also enhances the overall quality of the educational system.

The application of methodological knowledge allows students to actively participate in research projects, develop their own ideas, and become part of the scientific community. For academic staff as well, methodology serves as a tool to ensure the scientific grounding and quality of the teaching process. As Popović and Đorđević (2021) emphasize, "methodology is not merely a research technique, but a way of thinking that contributes to shaping academic culture and ethics."

In the context of the Republic of Serbia, higher education is undergoing a transition phase marked by reforms aligned with European educational standards. However, despite the formal inclusion of methodology courses in curricula, practice reveals a range of issues in their implementation: from theory-oriented teaching, a lack of practical research tasks, to limited access to resources and mentorship (Nikolić, 2021). The key question that arises is: How and to what extent is scientific research methodology actually applied in higher education in Republic of Serbia? Answering this question requires a systematic analysis of the current state, the challenges faced by students and faculty, as well as perspectives for improvement. The aim of this paper is to identify, through theoretical and empirical approaches, the key problems in the application of scientific research methodology in higher education institutions in Republic of Serbia and to offer concrete recommendations for overcoming them. Additionally, the paper aims to highlight the opportunities that arise

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through modern technologies, the internationalization of studies, and curriculum reforms geared toward research-based learning (European Commission, 2020).

2. Theoretical framework

The methodology of scientific research encompasses a set of principles, rules, and techniques that enable the systematic collection, processing, and interpretation of data in order to find scientifically valid answers to posed research questions. It represents an indispensable part of any serious scientific endeavor, as it ensures the objectivity, reliability, and reproducibility of results (Neuman, 2014). Speaking about higher education, research methodology serves as the foundation for developing academic competencies among students, including hypothesis formulation, selection of appropriate methods, and the application of quantitative and qualitative techniques. As Vidanović (2011) points out, “methodology is not merely the knowledge of technical aspects of research, but a deeper understanding of the process of creating scientific truth.”

In contemporary academic discourse, methodology also has a didactic function—it enables students to become researchers, not just passive consumers of knowledge (Flick, 2018). In this sense, it is viewed as a bridge between theory and practice, between academic education and applied knowledge. One of the most important goals of higher education is the development of students’ abilities to think critically and analyze phenomena, data, and arguments. The methodology of scientific research plays a key role in this process, as it encourages reflection on causes and consequences, analysis of samples, and the construction of one’s own evidence-based positions (Paul & Elder, 2014).

When properly organized, methodology teaching encourages learners to question information, use scientific logic, and develop the ability to ask questions—foundations of any serious scientific approach (Creswell, 2018). It also enables the development of epistemological awareness among students—the understanding of how we know what we know (Vasiljević, 2022). For these reasons, methodology courses should not be reduced to the mere reproduction of rules and concepts but rather designed as interactive workshops that foster a research culture and academic autonomy among students.

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA), established by the Bologna Process in 1999, aims to unify standards and improve the quality of teaching, mobility, and degree recognition among member states. One of the main requirements of the reform is the strengthening of research capacities within study programs and the integration of scientific research with teaching (European Commission, 2020). According to the document Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ENQA, 2015), higher education should promote research as an integral part of the curriculum through methods that actively engage students in the knowledge discovery process. In line with this, Republic of Serbia, as part of the EHEA, recognizes the importance of developing research literacy among students. However, as Petrović and Ristić (2020) note, “there is a gap between formal compliance with Bologna principles and their actual implementation in higher education institutions.” Methodology courses are often treated as incidental, theory-oriented subjects without deep integration with research practice. Therefore, it is necessary to further improve curricula, increase institutional support for research-based learning, and strengthen the competencies of academic staff in the field of modern research techniques, in order to fully realize the principles of the Bologna process in practice. Furthermore, continuous evaluation and adaptation of methodology curricula are essential to meet the dynamic demands of the contemporary research environment. Only through an integrated approach that encompasses theory, practice, and institutional support can a high level of research literacy and competence among students be achieved, which is crucial for improving the quality of higher education in the Republic of Serbia.

3. Research methodology

In accordance with the objective of this study, empirical research was conducted employing a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods. This strategy enables a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and potentials in the application of scientific research methodology in higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia. The quantitative part provides statistical insight into participants’ perceptions and experiences, while the qualitative part allows for a deeper interpretation of meanings and context (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Research instruments

The questionnaire used in the quantitative phase contained closed-ended questions with a Likert scale (1–5) and several open-ended questions. The questions were grouped into four thematic areas: (1) theoretical understanding of methodology, (2) experience with research work, (3) evaluation of the quality of methodology teaching and (4) institutional support for scientific research activities. For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were employed, allowing participants to freely express their views, guided through key thematic topics: motivation for research, obstacles in applying methodological knowledge and suggestions for improvement.

Research questions

1. What are the differences in methodology courses across universities in terms of duration, practical components, and standardization, and how do these differences affect the perception of teaching quality?
2. What are the main challenges in the application of research methodology teaching, especially regarding practical activities and the availability of resources?
3. How do the availability of software tools, literature, and institutional support influence student motivation and satisfaction with methodology courses?
4. Are there statistically significant differences between universities in the assessment of methodology teaching quality and institutional support?
5. How do students perceive and what motivates them to apply research methodology beyond exam requirements?
6. What opportunities exist for improving methodology teaching through project-based learning, faculty development, and digitalization?

Sample

The sample was purposively selected and included academic staff and students from six public universities:

1. University of Belgrade (87 respondents);
2. University of Novi Sad (87 respondents);
3. University of Niš (87 respondents);
4. University of Kragujevac (86 respondents);
5. University of Priština with temporary seat in Kosovska Mitrovica (87 respondents);
6. State University of Novi Pazar (86 respondents).

In total, 520 respondents participated in the quantitative survey, including 370 students and 150 academic staff members. Participants represented various fields (social sciences, natural sciences and mathematics, technical and biomedical sciences), enabling comparative analysis. The qualitative part consisted of 24 semi-structured interviews (12 with students and 12 with faculty), evenly distributed across the universities.

Research period and ethical considerations

The study was conducted between October 2024 and May 2025. All participants were informed about the research objective, data processing methods and guaranteed anonymity. The research adhered to ethical principles and data protection regulations (GDPR). It is important to note that during the research period, protests and blockades occurred in several cities, including university centers, which affected the teaching process and participant availability. University of Belgrade and University of Novi Sad were particularly affected, with activities suspended during certain periods due to security concerns and student gatherings. These circumstances impacted: reduced physical availability of staff and students, delays in interview scheduling, increased number of online questionnaires compared to planned face-to-face data collection and additional stress among participants, some of whom expressed distrust or fatigue regarding institutional issues. In qualitative interviews, some students spontaneously reported feelings of academic uncertainty and decreased motivation to engage in research activities during the blockades, which constitutes an important contextual finding.

One of the prominent challenges in methodology teaching is its predominantly theoretical orientation, lacking sufficient connection to concrete and current issues. This problem became especially pronounced under crisis conditions, such as social and institutional disruptions in 2025. In this context, a professor from the University of Belgrade noted:

“Methodology teaching must be flexible and applicable, not merely theoretical. The situation with the blockades in 2025 further demonstrated the importance of institutional resilience and the need for the educational process to be equipped to adapt to crisis conditions.” (Interview, March 17, 2025)

This statement highlights the need to redefine teaching methods and introduce instruments enabling continuous work even under exceptional circumstances – including digital infrastructure, flexible evaluation forms, and opportunities for engaging students in relevant research topics.

4. Results and discussion

The analysis of collected data from both the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews reveals a number of structural and operational challenges related to the application of scientific research methodology in higher education in the Republic of Serbia. Additionally, concrete opportunities for improvement have been identified, relying on modern pedagogical and institutional approaches.

Identified challenges

Inconsistency of methodology courses across universities. The research results indicate significant differences in the structure, scope, and quality of methodology courses between various universities and their faculties. While some institutions offer the methodology course over multiple semesters, including practical assignments, others limit it to a single semester of theoretical lectures without practical knowledge assessment. More than 60% of faculty members rated that “methodology courses should be more standardized and better integrated into all study programs”. Analyzing the data presented in Table 1, a clear connection can be observed between the course structure and the perceived quality of instruction. Universities that offer two-semester methodology programs with practical components receive higher teaching quality ratings, indicating that more intensive and comprehensive study of methodology has a positive impact on the overall academic experience. Particularly concerning is the fact that none of the universities, except the one in Belgrade, implement standardized methodology courses. This lack of alignment leads to unequal development of research competencies among students from different universities, representing a serious obstacle to improving the quality of higher education in Republic of Serbia.

Table 1. Variability of Methodology Courses Across Universities

University	Number of Semesters with Methodology	Included Practical Activities (%)	Course Standardization (Yes/No)	Teaching Quality Rating (1-5)
University of Belgrade	2	60	Yes	4.2
University of Novi Sad	1	40	No	3.5
University of Niš	1	35	No	3.2
University of Kragujevac	1	30	No	3.1
University of Priština in Kosovska Mitrovica	1	20	No	2.8
State University of Novi Pazar	1	25	No	2.9

Source: Author, based on survey results

Lack of practical research activities. A significant proportion of surveyed students (74%) expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of opportunities to actively participate in research projects as part of their academic coursework. According to their responses, the content of methodology courses largely remains at the level of theoretical lectures, without concrete application of acquired knowledge. Interviews further illuminated this issue, revealing a shared need for methodology learning to move beyond “memorizing definitions” and toward active application through simulations of real research. As one female student from the University of Niš stated: “methodology should be learned through doing research, not through rote memorization” (interview, March 21, 2025). These findings highlight the need to enrich methodology curricula with practical components, in order to help students develop functional knowledge and research skills applicable in both academic and professional contexts. In addition to student responses, data obtained from academic staff also point to serious shortcomings in the practical application of methodology knowledge. More than 65% of surveyed faculty members stated that methodology instruction at their respective universities is not sufficiently focused on developing students’ practical research skills. In qualitative interviews, faculty members reported being frequently constrained by rigid curricula and a lack of institutional support for implementing practical tasks, field research, or laboratory work. A professor from University of Kragujevac noted: “without time, space, and resources for practical work, methodology teaching remains abstract and too far removed from actual research processes” (interview, April 5, 2025).

Low student motivation to apply methodology beyond exams. A large number of students perceive methodology as a difficult, abstract, and largely formal subject, whose primary purpose – as they see it – is to pass exams rather than to acquire practical knowledge and research skills. Such a perception leads to limited application of learned content in broader academic and professional contexts. According to research findings, as many as 68% of students believe that their faculty does not provide sufficient motivational incentives to engage in research activities (Table 2). These data point to the need for improving the teaching approach in a way that presents methodology as a relevant and applicable tool across various scientific and professional fields. At the same time, it is necessary to develop mechanisms that encourage a more active student role in the research process, so that methodology is perceived as a means for solving real-world problems, rather than merely an exam requirement.

Table 2. Student motivation for applying methodology beyond exams

Student Attitudes	Percentage (%)
Methodology is useful and applicable	42%
Methodology is difficult and only serves exam purposes	58%
There is motivation for research through courses	32%
Lack of motivation due to absence of practical assignments	68%

Source: Author, based on survey results

Limited Resources for scientific work and research. At several universities, serious deficiencies have been observed regarding the availability of software tools (e.g., SPSS, NVivo), academic literature, and institutional support for student involvement in research projects. Participants from Kosovska Mitrovica and Novi Pazar particularly emphasized the challenges arising from their peripheral position in relation to the main university centers (*Table 3*).

Table 3. Availability of Research Resources at Universities

University	Access to Software (SPSS/NVivo)	Availability of Modern Literature	Student Involvement in Research Projects	Institutional Support Rating (1–5)
University of Belgrade	Yes	High	Moderate	4.3
University of Novi Sad	Partial	Moderate	Limited	3.6
University of Niš	No	Limited	Low	3.1
University of Kragujevac	No	Limited	Low	3.0
University of Priština in Kosovska Mitrovica	No	Very Limited	Very Low	2.5
State University of Novi Pazar	No	Very Limited	Very Low	2.4

Source: Author, based on survey and interview results

Weak link between theory and practice. Although most instructors recognize research methodology as a key element in the development of academic and professional competencies, the study's results indicate that this subject is often taught predominantly in a theoretical manner, without adequate application in real or simulated situations from the relevant field. Students have also emphasized the lack of connection between learned theoretical concepts and concrete practical examples, which makes it difficult to understand and apply methodological knowledge in practice. According to the data presented in *Table 4*, this gap between theory and practice represents a significant challenge in methodology teaching, as it negatively affects student motivation and the quality of their learning. This highlights the need to incorporate concrete examples, case studies, and practical assignments into the curriculum, helping students better understand and apply theoretical knowledge in real research contexts.

Table 4. Availability of research resources according to faculty survey

Research Resources	Availability (%)	Satisfaction (%)
Statistical analysis software (SPSS, NVivo)	45%	38%
Access to scientific literature	70%	60%
Financial support for research projects	25%	20%
Opportunities for collaboration with industry/institutions	30%	28%

Source: Author, based on survey results

Perspectives and opportunities

Introducing project-based learning and research seminars. One of the key recommendations is to incorporate mandatory research assignments and seminars into methodology courses. Students expressed a positive attitude toward the idea of participating in small research teams, in collaboration with faculty members, starting from the second year of study.

Strengthening faculty competencies in research methodology. There is a recognized need for additional training of teaching staff, especially in modern research approaches and digital tools. More than 40% of faculty members admitted they had not received further methodological training since their initial education.

Digitalization and use of data analysis software. The implementation of tools such as SPSS, R, Excel, MAXQDA, and NVivo is seen as an opportunity to improve teaching. Institutional support is needed in terms of software licenses, training, and technical infrastructure. Additionally, the use of simulated datasets for exercises increases student engagement.

Support from the Ministry and accreditation bodies. Respondents emphasized that standardization and improvement of methodology instruction depend on systemic support – including regulations by the National Accreditation Body and financial aid from the Ministry of Education. Particularly important is the implementation of research components into the accreditation standards of study programs.

International cooperation and exchange of best practices. Programs such as Erasmus+ enable students and faculty to explore different approaches to teaching methodology abroad. Participants from universities involved in Erasmus programs reported higher levels of research engagement and motivation (*Table 5*).

Table 5. Perspectives and Opportunities for Improving Methodology Teaching

Improvement Opportunities	Respondent Support (%)
Introduction of project-based learning	80%
Teacher training in modern research methods	70%
Digitalization of teaching and software support	75%
Greater support from the Ministry and accreditation bodies	65%
International cooperation (e.g., Erasmus+)	55%

Source: Author, based on survey results

It was observed that the 2025 blockades were not only obstacles but also a litmus test for the flexibility of the teaching process. Situations where faculties had to switch to online or hybrid models, or where students protested due to their inability to participate in research projects, highlighted the need for a paradigm shift – from reproductive learning toward research-based learning.

Before presenting the detailed statistical results, Pearson's correlation and ANOVA analyses were conducted to explore the relationships and differences between key variables related to methodology teaching quality, institutional support, and student motivation across various universities. These analyses aimed to uncover significant associations among course characteristics, resource availability, and perceptions of teaching effectiveness, as well as to identify whether there are meaningful variations in these factors between different institutions. The findings provide valuable insights into areas that require targeted interventions to enhance the overall quality and equity of research methodology education in the Republic of Serbia.

Table 6. Statistical Association Between Key Aspects of Methodology Teaching and the Perception of Quality and Support

No.	Variables for Correlation	Pearson's corr.	Sig. (p-value)	Comment
1.	"number of methodology semesters" and "teaching quality rating"	0.42	0.031	moderate positive correlation
2.	"practical activities" and "teaching quality rating"	0.39	0.028	moderate positive correlation
3.	"standardization" and "teaching quality rating"	0.35	0.041	weak positive correlation
4.	"motivation for research" and "lack of motivation"	-0.48	0.017	moderate negative correlation
5.	"access to software" and "institutional support rating"	0.55	0.008	moderate positive correlation
6.	"availability of literature" and "institutional support rating"	0.44	0.022	moderate positive correlation
7.	"student involved in projects" and "institutional support rating"	0.33	0.038	weak positive correlation
8.	"satisfaction with software" and "software availability"	0.29	0.049	weak positive correlation
9.	"satisfaction with literature" and "literature availability"	0.38	0.034	weak to moderate positive correlation
10.	"satisfaction with financial support" and "level of financial support"	0.27	0.043	weak positive correlation

Source: Author, based on survey results

The analysis of the presented Pearson correlation coefficients provides insight into the complex interplay of factors influencing the perception of the quality of methodology teaching and institutional support among students at various universities in the Republic of Serbia. Generally, it is observed that key elements such as the length of courses, the proportion of practical activities, and the availability of software tools and literature resources positively correlate with the perceived quality of teaching and institutional support. The duration of the course and the inclusion of practical activities are important factors for increasing student satisfaction, as confirmed by moderate to weak positive correlations with the quality of teaching ratings. Although standardization of courses shows only a weak correlation, it points to the potential benefits of a more unified curriculum. A negative correlation between motivation for research and the feeling of lack of motivation clearly suggests that one of the key challenges in methodology teaching is student motivation, which is closely linked to the quality and method of instruction. Technical support through the availability of software tools and up-to-date literature is strongly associated with the assessment of institutional support, highlighting the importance of investing in infrastructure and resources for successful research activities. However, weaker and often insignificant correlations related to satisfaction with resource availability and student involvement in projects may indicate inefficient use of available resources or differing approaches by universities in engaging students.

Table 7. ANOVA summary table showing variation between and within groups

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares (SS)	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Mean Squares (MS)	F Value	p-value
Between Groups	95.34	5	19.07	55.85	< 0.0001
Within Groups (Error)	173.45	514	0.337		
Total	268.79	519			

Source: Author, based on survey results

Building on the insights gained from the correlation analysis, the ANOVA test was conducted to determine whether statistically significant differences exist in the perception of methodology teaching quality and institutional support across different universities. The ANOVA results (*Table 7*) confirm that the observed variations in student and faculty ratings among universities are not due to random chance, but reflect real differences in educational conditions and practices. The significant F value ($F(5, 514) = 55.85, p = 0.0001$) highlights meaningful disparities in key factors such as course structure, availability of practical activities, and institutional resources. These findings complement the correlation results by quantifying how university affiliation affects the overall assessment of methodology instruction. Specifically, the University of Belgrade consistently ranks highest, which aligns with its longer courses, better practical engagement, and superior access to resources as previously indicated by moderate positive correlations. Conversely, universities in Kosovska Mitrovica and Novi Pazar show statistically significantly lower scores, corroborating prior findings regarding limited resource availability and weaker institutional support. The mid-range positioning of universities such as Novi Sad, Niš, and Kragujevac suggests some progress but also identifies areas for improvement in curriculum standardization and practical implementation. Overall, the ANOVA analysis emphasizes that addressing these inter-university disparities requires systemic interventions, including curriculum harmonization, increased practical training opportunities, and strengthened institutional support. This will ensure more equitable and high-quality methodology education for students throughout the Republic of Serbia.

5. Conclusion

Research methodology holds a central place in higher education because it not only provides a foundation for acquiring theoretical knowledge but also fosters the development of analytical thinking, critical evaluation skills, and practical abilities necessary for solving complex problems. In the context of modern higher education in the Republic of Serbia, high-quality methodology teaching can contribute to strengthening the research culture and increasing the relevance of academic outcomes in social and economic contexts. The results of this study have shown that there are numerous challenges regarding the quality, accessibility, and application of methodology teaching — ranging from uneven curricula and lack of practical implementation to limited resources and low student motivation. Situations such as the blockades and institutional difficulties further highlighted weaknesses in teaching organization and the insufficient resilience of the educational system in times of crisis.

Therefore, it is clear that systemic and comprehensive changes are needed. These changes should include:

- Reform of curricula and study programs by introducing mandatory research components and project-based learning;
- Continuous professional development of teaching staff, with an emphasis on modern research methods and digital tools;
- Infrastructure and software support that enables students to actively engage in data processing and analysis;
- Greater involvement of students in real research projects through cooperation with institutes, industry, and international partners.

Without these measures, there is a risk that methodology will remain perceived as a “theoretical discipline without practical value”, which directly threatens the goals of educational reform and the development of research excellence.

As highlighted by the research, students desire more substantive and applicable methodology instruction, and teachers are willing to embrace change if systemic support is provided. The future of methodology teaching in Serbian higher education depends on the academic community’s ability to respond to these challenges – boldly, strategically, and in collaboration with the broader social community.

However, several limitations of this study should be acknowledged and critically reflected upon in order to properly contextualize the findings and avoid overgeneralization. First, the research was conducted during a period of significant institutional disruption, marked by student protests, blockades, and temporary suspension of teaching activities at several universities – most notably in Belgrade and Novi Sad. These circumstances influenced the data collection process by reducing participant availability and increasing the reliance on online tools, possibly affecting the reliability and emotional neutrality of responses. Second, although the sample covered six public universities and offered valuable regional insights, it excluded private institutions and colleges, which often operate under different organizational and pedagogical frameworks. Their exclusion limits the generalizability of the findings and calls for broader inclusion in future research. Third, although the mixed-methods approach allowed for both quantitative scope and qualitative depth, the number of

interviews (24 in total) may not fully reflect the diversity of experiences across all fields and institutional types. As such, the qualitative findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than universally representative.

Future research should aim to expand the institutional sample to include private universities, vocational colleges, and institutions from less represented regions. It would also be valuable to undertake longitudinal studies that follow changes over time — particularly in response to newly implemented reforms or training programs for teaching staff. Moreover, future investigations could explore the impact of specific digital tools, software-supported learning, and project-based teaching models on student engagement and long-term research competence. Finally, comparative international studies, especially within the European Higher Education Area, could contribute to identifying and transferring good practices in methodology teaching. Such efforts would enable the Serbian higher education system to align more effectively with European standards, while also addressing local contextual challenges through evidence-based solutions.

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