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The concept and importance of trust in the student – teacher relationship: Sociological discourse

Abstract

It is crucial for young people to be able to distinguish situations in which they approach trust building as a substantial construct of sociability, which is a prerequisite for their further intellectual, social and cultural development. Education within higher education programs, ie faculties, represents a person's integration into a different and demanding international space with special standards within professional education, which certainly represents a challenge for an individual in the process of developing new social relations. In this context, the interaction and trust building amongst students and teachers is a key factor for the success of the entire tertiary educational process. Timely, this paper substantively crosslinks the trust, placing it in the research focus as a capital relation in the study process and the most delicate possible relationship amongst students and teachers. The search for answers to this topic required an interdisciplinary approach as well as literature references in the field of sociology, pedagogy, philosophy and communication all of which combine the results of empirical research, which, significantly contributed to an understanding of the trust concept and its importance in student-teacher relationship. It is our hope that this paper or at least some parts of it will become a guideline and a manual for greater awareness of this form of academic experience or process in the student-professor relationship which, like other interpersonal relationships is primarily, or should be, based on trust.

Keywords: *faculty; communication; student; teacher; teaching; trust; technology*

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Introduction

The Faculty is an organizational unit of the university that performs teaching and scientific-teaching activities within one or several related or interconnected science disciplines and ensures their development. Students as a youth population in the process of 'committing to the future', by choosing one of the desired and/or available faculties are to approach a more complex, post-secondary stage of education. The transition from high school to faculty (college) is often a difficult adjustment process for pupils who gain student status. The concept of schooling, learning and testing that they knew until then is changing, which makes it difficult for them to adopt new rules and regulations, and may result in indifference (initial or permanent) and by frequent questioning of individual potentials, which is primarily reflected in the teaching process - building trust between students and teachers starting point and basis. Due to insufficient desire to acquire new knowledge and skills, students often end the study cycle with inadequately developed competencies and as such are less competitive in the labor market. The curriculum represented in higher education institutions has its ergological significance (material space, institutionalization, established professional status, appropriate means and methods, etc.) as well as docimological specificity (the way of grading students and teachers based on knowledge transmission) but what forms the backbone of the entire educational process aimed at personal development is the so-called training skills triangle or didactic triangle - student, teacher and curriculum[3]. Classes are held on a well-designed educational platform which, in addition to being prepared for the transfer of knowledge, new work experiences and learning, also represents a constant pedagogical vigilance in the relationship educator/teacher/professor - trainee/pupil/ student. This aspect *a posteriori* of educational practice is a weft for establishing an interpersonal relationship that is primarily developed and nurtured through individual opportunity as well as the expectation of a positive outcome, which is the driving force of trust[4]. As a value construct, a trust is basically co-formed by intention (the idea of an individual and/or group to be realized by verbalization and/or action), goal (designed motivational guideline for realization of desires: materialization and satisfaction), communication (social interaction of information exchange) and realization (cognition, realization, execution and shaping of the connection of social actors within the available networks of relations

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[3] Group of authors, *Sociološki leksikon* (Beograd: *Savremena administracija*, 1982), p. 390
[4] Amel Alić, Haris Cerić, Sedin Habibović, *Obilježja kulture mladih* (Sarajevo: *Centar za napredne studije*, 2018), p. 45

for the purpose of the common and lasting good). Interactive learning ('collaborative learning' through interpersonal communication) which is one of the most important processes in teaching, among other things, also comes from the quality of the relationship between students and teachers. One of the possibilities of completing such relationship is focused on the preference of abandoning certain patterns which are typical in traditional teaching, such as, in one hand, the verbal dominance of teachers with 'docent restraint and on the other hand the predominant memory-reproductive activities' of the students with minimal motivational content/stimuli[5]. Education technology has long determined new teaching methods, especially digital device support, development of applications for interpersonal and group communication between teachers and students, organization of *online* learning platforms, etc., which focuses on the student, teaching is dislocated from the classroom and the educational paradigm (verbal and reproductive instruction) is changed. Perhaps trust alone has the privilege of remaining unchanged in these media-aware educational processes.

During the research, we analyzed the concept and importance of trust in the student-teacher relationship through four categorical correlations (concepts that assume each other) and these are trust (definitive basis of trust), communication (interpersonal code), technology (education technology) and teaching (trust before colloquium). These categories, respectively and synergistically immanent properties, largely shape the characteristics of the relationship between student and teacher, both, in the teaching process and in the entire academic space, which is ultimately confirmed by research conducted.

Research methodology

The complex social construct of trust and its phenomenological nature in the preliminary analysis were clarified as a conceptually higher premise that unites other categories and mediates the conclusions that gave the content of the research subject to this project task and its methodological framework. We examined *the role and importance of trust in the teacher-student relationship* with an initial problem (research) question that reads: *What are the ways to build a social relationship between teacher and student that are based on trust?* Based on the research in question which is of an interdisciplinary character have been determined social and scientific goals of the research. Usability and

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5 See: Anita Popović, *Interaktivno učenje - Inovativni način rada u nastavi*, Obrazovna teh-nologija, br. 4 (Beograd: *Evropski institut za informatiku i obrazovnu tehnologiju,* 2007), p. 55

usefulness of research results in teaching practice orientation has shaped the *social goal.* We approached the logical - theoretical structuring of highly correlated categories (determination of their qualitative characteristics) and then established the turning points of new knowledge and determined the way of their networking by empirical research (collection, organization, interpretation and analysis of statistical data). In this way, sociological approximation (approximate determination) or, leastways, arbitrary judgment about certainly the most important relationship in the educational process ─ student - professor is avoided. The potential experiential verifiability of the presented data has become the guiding principle of this research. Namely, relevant data can become a reliable corrective in the represented models of teaching staff behavior, which consequently reflects on the attitudes of students, as well as on the quality of the teaching process itself. This complex activity over time (is becoming) remains a predisposition to build trust, not only in the teaching process, but in the overall academic environment. *The scientific goal* of the research is to focus on the analysis of trust as a social relationship in real spatial and social frameworks (higher education institution - faculty) in which we could assess the degree of its feasibility. We drew plausible guidelines from relevant scientific papers that discuss various processes and phenomena in the education system. We also tried to take into account the opinion of students and teachers who were informed in a timely manner and involved in the initial research process. It turned out that communication skills ('good', 'bad' communicator), as well as listening skills in communication represent both a starting point, a mental assumption, a 'susceptible episteme' but also a constant in the explication of the relationship between student and professor built on trust. In that sense by scientific description, classification and explanatory, causality in (co) relations have been determined like: categorical (conceptual, value, purposeful) and interpersonal that are based on a kind of (academic, educational) communication strategy in the course of which we detected strength and possibilities, but also obstacles and weaknesses. All of the above led us to a general hypothesis that we tested in the research process, which was:

The manner and quality of communication significantly affects the building of social relations, ie trust in the student-teacher relationship.

In the process of concretizing the general hypothesis, special hypotheses were specified. As structural factors, they are shaped by a dual statement:

- *every human action is based on some degree of trust*;
- *communication is key to building trust.*

Further elaboration of special hypotheses is symmetrically set up individually and contained in the following assumptions:

- *acquired trust can be lost*;
- *lack of trust leads to general alienation*;
- *degree of trust established in communication is most clearly read in the frequency of feedback in the student-professor relationship*;
- *communication channels that build trust between students and professors faster are represented by the traditional teaching method (face to face);*
- *trust between student and professor must be mutual.*

The research data that we will present in this text are the result of project activities conducted at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Sarajevo at the end of 2019. Out of 295 respondents who participated in the research, 60.3% were men and 39.7% were women. The most common age of the aimed population is 20 years, while the average age is 22.5 years. Students were the target population, while the research methodology supposed to, during field-work and analysis of the obtained data, derive data from the attitudes, experiences and opinions of students about the phenomenon of trust and its construction in the academic environment. Data for the needs of the research were collected by the survey and the instrument of the survey questionnaire, which was distributed to the target population *face to face* or by group/individual filling of the questionnaire. Data collected (measurement instrument) included groups of statements in which respondents expressed their views, having the following options: *fully agree, agree, disagree, completely disagree* and *neither*. The statistical package SPSS (*Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*) was used for statistical data analysis. The research included students from all Departments of the Faculty of Political Science, University of Sarajevo - sociology, political science, security and peace studies, social work and communication. According to the number and study orientation in the sample, the subjects consisted of heterogeneous groups of undergraduates (from I to V years), ie I and II study cycles. For the purposes of this paper (the original research is significantly more extensive), we approached the selection of questions and sorting out qualitative and quantitative continuous research variables in order to gain accurate and readable data in a given thematic framework, but also to the format of the journal in which the paper included, in view of the complexity of this value construct and its ubiquity in academic interaction, which, after all, makes it a relevant subject of sociological research. Given the fact that each of the categorical correlates was conceptually treated and sociologically predicted as creative and decisive in building a primarily social relationship of trust, and that in addition to statis-

tical data, a conclusion was drawn in the *Concluding Remarks*, we approached to a concise unification of presented scientific content.

In the text, in addition to the term teacher, we also used the term professor because we believe that they have common aspects of meaning - the same knowledge management strategy, detailed knowledge and skills on how to teach a particular subject, related to communication competencies and specifics in knowledge transfer methods. culture, classroom teaching, professional ethics, etc. The difference compared to other professions that have the same determinants is in the degree of their development and consistency with the same.

The concept and meaning of trust – definitive basis

Given the fact that the concept of trust in this research was set as an imperative in building interpersonal social relations, we approached its analysis as a thoughtful and emotional process based on reality, or as an individual experience in social reality that creates, complements and corrects its various forms through interaction with other people. It is an attitude accumulated by positivity, a process that is primarily learned, experientially shaped and nurtured individually and through relationships with other people. In the logic of everyday life that is tautological reasoning and opening to emerging situations in a way that by interacting with others our needs, views and interests, especially when initiating a social action (cooperation) or establishing a social relationship (based on the principle reciprocity) will be taken into account, and that they will be purposeful, mutually beneficial and that we will be protected from possible harm during their duration. In the societal sense, trust is treated as a source of social capital that is definitely derived from the complex of social life (community/sociocultural and viral, networks, norms and trust) while in practice it is the basis that allows individuals to act more effectively in achieving common goals. 73.7% of respondents believe that every human action is based on some degree of trust, of which 33.1% of students agree with this statement, while 40.6% of them choose the option *I completely agree*. The backbone of trust as a real and potential resource consists of a spiritual, material, and individual and collective ethical component. The most important thing in this setting is that it is a long journey with countless norms and obstacles dictated by everyday life, and its private and public spheres. Thus, gaining trust is a lengthy process, and this was confirmed by the respondents choosing the option to *fully agree* in 50.7% of cases. We also observed that, when it comes to gender, there is no difference in perception towards gaining

trust as a long-term process. In the case when time shows that trust is neglected, absent or imitative in one or more segments of social coexistence and co-operation (disrespect of agreed actions, conflict situations, 'leaving stranded', selective skepticism, excessive individual ambition, ignoring other people's needs, etc.), which is primarily indicated by communication micro-barriers (oral, written, contact/non-verbal and e-communication) of social network actors, it directly leads to undermining the possibility to heal and continue this relationship[6]. In the simplified version, this means that the trust gained can be lost. On the whole sample, the preferred answer of the students regarding the indicated statement/attitude was 55.3% as in completely agreed. An individual memorizes destabilization of the relationship emotionally and experientially forming a kind of personal shield that indicates the knowledge from the immediate experience - unpleasant/bad and/or stimulating/careful/good. Knowledge about oneself and others is possible only at the level of appearance, no matter how intriguing it may be, because a more permanent lack of trust leads to general alienation (alienation of oneself 'above all'), and many respondents agree with this (64.0%). A statistically important guideline for future research is the opinion of students who rated this relative alternative the most with the option *neither agree nor disagree* (38.6%). Having in mind that this is a population group which, due to its dynamism and age, and immanent intellectual, emotional, ethological and other characteristics, is just gaining experience of trust (especially academic), this option/percentage is acceptable.

Communication act and improving the ability to use knowledge – interpersonal code

Communication is a universal process in human society. It is based on acting by handling symbols and certain behaviors (verbal and nonverbal communication) about the meaning of which there is a convention in social communities on the basis of which individuals understand the meaning of the actions of other individuals. An integral part of communication is bi-directionality and feedback. The most common form of communication is interpersonal communication (face-to-face communication within smaller groups) and is a basic instrument of education and by its nature the relationship to the situation in which it takes place (process, content, institution, etc.) is planned, formal and public. In addition to this phrase, two other full-

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[6] Maja Lamza-Maronić, Jerko Glavaš, *Poslovno komuniciranje*, Studio HS Internet, Priručnik za studente ekonomskih fakulteta (Osijek: *Ekonomski fakultet u Osijeku*, 2008), p. 2

fledged words are often cited in the literature, namely communication competence (communication language ability), which implies someone's behavior adequate to the given circumstances, giving the individual the opportunity to realize his personal and relational goals[7]. Quality and competence in the communication process within higher education institutions are the encouragement of knowledge and the improvement of the ability to 'use that knowledge in the communication act'[8]. Professional interpretation as a thought process, presentation, the art of interpretation, in this case the transfer of knowledge, nurtured in the spirit of complete, correct, timely informing of a recipient (listener), and access to communication (cordiality and openness) are the most appropriate modes of establishing trust. According to the results of the research, we came to data that clearly show that communication is key to establishing trust. A total of 91.9% of respondents believe that communication is key to establishing trust, out of which 41.2% of students agree with this statement, while 50.7% of them fully agree with this statement. There is also a trend that students more often fully agree with the statement that communication is key to establishing trust for female students. On the other hand, female students (31.3%) find it much easier to establish trust in other people, while male students (18.6%) are more cautious. Depending on the degree of communication, the degree of established trust based on that communication which is most clearly read in the frequency of feedback (adequate feedback from students indicates the justification and validity of teaching content) students will achieve and reach complex levels (and stages) of learning, either that it is about understanding, analyzing, synthesizing or evaluating the professional material they encounter in the teaching process. In 56.2% of cases, students felt that the teacher-student relationship experienced positive feedback, while 13.2% of respondents from half of the teaching staff with whom they interacted during their studies experienced belittlement of their own views and discussions. When it comes to perceived ways of communication or cordiality/kindness towards the grumpiness of the teaching staff during communication with students, the attitudes of the surveyed population are different, in a way that 25.8% of surveyed students believe that at least 50% of the teaching staff with whom one tried to achieve communication expressed reluctance during the communication process. On the other hand, 59% of respondents believe that at least ½ of the teaching staff approach students cor-

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[7] Kathleen K. Reardon, *Interpersonalna komunikacija – gdje se misli susreću*, Biblioteka: Komunikologija, Prvo izdanje (Zagreb: *Alinea,* 1998), p. 27

[8] cf. Vesna Bagarić, Jelena Mihaljević – Đigunović, *Definiranje komunikacijske kompetencije.* Metodika: časopis za teoriju i praksu metodika u predškolskom odgoju, školskoj i visokoškolskoj izobrazbi, Vol. 8, br. 1 (Zagreb: *Učiteljski fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu*, 2007), p. 91

dially and/or kindly. Thus, erroneous and tactless communication processes can greatly undermine and permanently disrupt trust, both in general and in the teaching process.

The role of modern tehnology in the process of building trust – education technology

The application and representation of modern technologies in the information and communication industry is an important segment in the context of gaining trust between teachers and students and is predominantly related to the technological and communication aspect of improving human interaction. *Online*, digital, interactive (electronic) platforms for interpersonal, group and mass communication, as well as ways - changes in communication practices between teachers and students caused by technological progression (eg. responders) have become an unaovidable part of communication between teacher - student, as well as a significant factor in building trust between them. In addition to classical teaching (face to face), selected media as a source of information and interaction are transmitted by different technologies. In the education system we have one-way (books, websites, etc.) and two-way (mobile, internet forums, video conferencing, etc.) technology. Media broadcasting is divided into asynchronous (participation by choice) and synchronous (simultaneous participation)[9]. In this context, it should be emphasized that students belonging to the '*online* generation' do not have a positive attitude about the digitalization of teaching. Namely, the students who participated in this research do not think that communication via the Internet builds trust between teachers and students faster (74.4% of them did not agree with this statement), and that 51.9% of students believe that modern technologies have slowed down the process of building trust. When asked which channels build trust faster - the Internet or face to face - students' attitudes are unequivocal, and over 70% of respondents believe that trust is built faster face to face. It is obvious that teaching conducted face to face, by students, ranks at the very top of choice when it comes to methods in the teaching process. On the other hand, the indicated data are indicators of lack of use of so called 'cold' technology, and many issues remain open that need to be addressed in a way that does not jeopardize the communication activities provided by the curriculum, but to ease the rules, modes and standards

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[9] Tony Bates, *Models for selecting and using tehcnology: Synchronus or asynchronus? Puslished: 29/06/2011,*. https://www.tonybates.ca/2011/06/29/models-for-selecting-and-using-technology-4-synchronous-or-asynchronous/, (dowloaded: 02/02/2020)

that do not set students in electronic statistics, a formal relationship, and also distance them from the true nature of education. Only in this way, the now generally accepted 'new' technologies can be used in the process of building trust between teachers and students, in an emancipatory way, and not in a way that restrains, suppresses and controls. Controversy over traditional (or classic, as we often call them) and modern information and communication channels is almost unnecessary in the framework of education because both spheres are an integral part of it.

Academic ethics and trust in the teaching process – trust before the colloquium

One of the most important dimensions in building trust is education, especially tertiary (education within higher education study programs, faculties). Students represent a social resource whose creative and innovative potentials, while providing the necessary conditions, can contribute to social development in the broadest sense. Specific characteristics of students, as an integral part of the young generation, are contained in the etymology of the term student, and that is interest in a specific area and striving for a goal that combines the acquisition and acquisition of knowledge through the most organized form of education ― teaching at a university (university, faculty)[10]. Faculties possess objective values that go beyond the interests or desires of any group within society, and focus educational processes, teaching, research, and teaching staff on the processes and relationships in academic groups. Teachers' trust in their fellow professors or students' trust in other students is treated as „inside – the – group" experiential trust, which is built by continuous interaction with specific people over a period of time, while students' trust in professors is called 'outside – the – group' trust/academic-status groups[11]. Education is immanently a social category and as such cannot exist outside the social relationship that takes place in the teacher-student relationship with the indispensable pedagogical dimension (development and improvement of educational work). Thus, the basis of the teaching process is an interpersonal relationship. The pedagogical review of these mutual and direct relations is succinctly included in the opinion of Alić, Cerić and

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[10] Vlasta Ilišin, Furio Radin, *Mladi u suvremenom hrvatskom društvu.* (Predgovor) in: Vlasta Ilišin, Furio Radin (ur.), *Mladi: problem ili resurs* (Zagreb: *Institut za društvena istraživanja,* 2007), p. 9

[11] Anthony S. Bryk, Barbara Schneider, *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement* (New York: *Russell Sage Foundation,* Part III, Chapter 6. *Relational Trust and Improving Academic Achievement*, 91-122, 2002), p. 93

Habibović, who point out: 'In the wide and sometimes difficult to encompass space of interpersonal relationships, numerous factors are involved every day for which neither the teacher nor the student are prepared, and it seems that they are often not even aware of them'[12]. Students can be blamed for absenteeism, failure to complete teaching obligations, behavioral problems, disrespect for professors, etc. Professors are required to have a serious approach to teaching and students who attend it, knowledge of academic subjects they teach, application of syllabus programs), knowledge of the framework in which students work (departments, groups, pairs, individually), consistency in the style of academic teaching, etc. The data show that 16% of the surveyed population has the opinion that at least 50% of teaching staff is not interested in the subject. On the other hand, 58.9% of respondents believe that teaching staff respond to errors in a timely manner and point them out, which is further characterized by a pronounced and visible interest in the content of the subject, which 64.5% of students believe. Furthermore, the professor is obliged to inform students about the goals, content and methods of teaching the subject, as well as the methods and criteria for monitoring their work, testing and assessment. If, for some reason, the indicated obligations of a student who does not fulfill his/her duties (attendance at classes, completion of teaching assignments, and acceptance of rules of conduct and studying in the academic community) are avoided, and/or, there are negative variations in the process of building trust between professors and students; 'academic reciprocity' is questionable. In this sense, he must be aware, because the interpersonal relationship that is created during teaching is a process by which not only the professor influences the student by his behavior, transfer and interpretation of knowledge, but there is also the opposite influence[13]. Only a professor who responsibly approaches the management (shaping) of the educational environment, transmitting information for the purpose of encouraging, motivating and successfully achieving the desired learning outcomes can be able to understand their own teaching methods and be sensitive to the needs of their students who will ultimately perceive and evaluate it. It is a relationship of 'mutual good', and trust should be mutual. The statement is accepted by students with a reference I agree (21.0%) and completely agree (69.8%), which ultimately implies agreement with the statement that trust should be mutual in 91.7% of cases. Also, an important segment of building trust in the teacher-student relationship is the expression of interest in student problems and needs, which, according to the surveyed students, in

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[12] Amel Alić, Haris Cerić, Sedin Habibović, *op. cit.*, p. 44
[13] Marija Bratanić, *Mikropedagogija*: *interakcijsko-komunikacijski aspekt odgoja* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1993), p. 32

43.5% of cases often and very often has the teaching staff of FPS. Thus, 40.2% of students believe that at least half of the teaching staff of FPN show interest in student wishes and suggestions, while 7.3% of respondents believe that this never happens.

Concluding remarks

At the socio – epistemological level, we sought to define the concept of trust, detect the meaning of communication for shaping trust, and recognize the mission of modern technologies in creating a new experience of trust ('viral trust'), placing special emphasis on the youth population. The operationalization of trust has resulted in new insights into building trust between students and teachers, and one of them is that the quality of teaching that a teacher will present depends largely on the degree of student involvement in teaching, while students depend on teachers' abilities and readiness to motivate and encourage them to learn. As has been repeatedly emphasized in this text, a relationship that implies openness, responsibility, reciprocity, empathy, and understanding is a sociogram of academic trust, as well as the trust that is built between students and professors. Based on the obtained data of the surveyed population, we can conclude that the process of gaining trust is a long and very complex process that must necessarily be mutual. Also, the vast majority of respondents believe that the trust gained can be very easily lost.

In the process of building trust is not only important way of communicating, but also the content of communication, it is very important that students get the impression that they are welcome to study, and that teaching staff is there to facilitate the education process, not to make it difficult. Therefore, the content of communication, ie whether students experienced some kind of belittlement of their own views and discussions or most often received positive feedback regarding their views, discussions and suggestions are important segments of establishing a quality and productive teacher-student relationship. Also, the proactive action of teaching staff, ie the expression of personal interest and empathy for student needs, desires and possibly problems, is an important component of quality interaction between students and professors. *The scientific elaboration that preceded this conclusive insight succusly confirmed all the proposed explanations and assumptions specified in the hypotheses. Bearing in mind that practice is the highest verifier of knowledge, hypotheses must, ultimately, be empirically verifiable, which was directive in this research. The data presented constitute a modest academic agenda that can benefit both students and professors. Based on all the above, we can say that the tested general hypothesis is accepted and that the manner and quality of com-*

munication of both teaching staff and students significantly affects the building of social relations, ie trust.

In the academic environment, trust is a complex process in which a certain member of an educational institution (professor, student - status participation) is ready to perform prescribed obligations respecting the ethics of science and educational work with the belief that other members of the educational institution will react in a positive way reliability (perseverance, loyalty), credibility (building a relationship in which the opposite party is trusted), credibility (affirmation through relationships of trust, honesty, respect and cooperation that serves as an incentive to others), competence (vocation, authority, ability) and goodwill (approach openly with the intention of achieving a successful relationship)[14].

Any information, data and conclusion derived from the conducted scientific research (theoretical and empirical) on the pages of this paper is a methodological force of knowledge in the eventual clarification and understanding of how to teach and how to acquire knowledge in relation to reciprocity (reverse influence) in flow of trust. So, it is not questionable whether the teacher will teach, but how he will teach. On the other hand, when a student is ready to acquire knowledge, the professor will very quickly figure out how to transfer it as well as possible. In this way, better communication is achieved, more noticeable results are achieved, self-initiative is encouraged, expectations are met, but also the duties of the student, which, as a positive educational activity, directly affects the teaching staff. Following the above, we can conclude that the status of a student and the status of a professor is one, above all an ethical obligation, a conceptual link of equal respect and a portal for gaining academic credibility. Trust between students and professors is the key to the successful achievement of a common goal in line with the law, mission and vision of the higher education institution, and is a meritorious factor in the success of the entire (tertiary) educational process.

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