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## CAREER PATHS OF ENGLISH GRADUATES IN SERBIA: THE CURIOUS CASE OF EFL TEACHING

### Abstract

Amidst widespread concerns about the declining status and profitability of humanities degrees, this paper investigates the employment potential of English graduates in Serbia. Based on a survey of 207 alumni from the English Department at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade who graduated within the past decade, we examine their career trajectories, the challenges they encountered when entering the job market and the relevance of their academic skills and knowledge to their current roles. Additionally, we analyse the proportion of graduates who pursue English language teaching, the modes of language instruction they engage in, their motivations for entering the profession, job satisfaction and suggestions for enhancing the professional standing of English language teachers.

**Key words:** English graduates, career choices, EFL teaching, motivations to become teachers

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, a significant shift has been observed in academia towards more career-focused undergraduate degrees in STEM<sup>1</sup>, business and

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<sup>1</sup> Science, technology, engineering and mathematics

medical fields. It is generally believed that specialised skill training will facilitate the transition to post-study careers compared to the broader set of skills offered by humanities degrees (Battershill & Kuperman 2023; Beal 2020: 3; Woods 2020: 3–4). Consequently, as enrolment numbers in humanities continue to dwindle, there is a growing concern among English graduates, both in English-speaking countries and elsewhere, regarding the perceived value of their degrees and the employment prospects after graduation (Adjoe 2017; MLA 2022; Sánchez & López 2022: 118).

Worldwide reports on teacher shortages and high attrition rates (Jungert et al. 2014; OECD 2005; Sinclair et al. 2006; Watt et al. 2012), which coincide with the claims about teachers in many national contexts being “underpaid and overworked, often operating in difficult physical and psychological conditions” (Johnston 1997: 682), have led many English-major graduates to diversify their career paths beyond the traditional roles in teaching and translation (Gagalang 2020: 461; Priddis et al. 2013: 16; Sánchez & López 2022: 120; Thao & Thuy 2024: 4). This trend is further amplified by the rapid changes in the labour market (Bright & Pryor 2005: 291; Helmersen et al. 2008: 11; Wu 2019: 13), the growing perception of English proficiency as a competitive advantage across various domains (Gagalang 2020: 461; Johnston 1997: 700) and the already mentioned inherent versatility of the English degree and language skills in general (Sánchez & López 2022: 118; Thao & Thuy 2024: 4).

Considering the extent and implications of these changes for English graduates, the academic institutions they attend and prospective employers, relatively little research has been conducted to explore the evolving career dynamics of English language specialists. Most of the existing research has focused on developing countries (e.g. Adjoe 2017 in Ghana; Gagalang 2020 in the Philippines; Sánchez & López 2022 in Costa Rica; Thao & Thuy 2024; Vu et al. 2022 in Vietnam) and to our knowledge, none has been conducted in the context of Serbia. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to bridge that gap by investigating new career patterns among alumni of the English Department at the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, the oldest and largest higher education institution in the country producing this profile of young professionals.

An online questionnaire aimed at those believed to have graduated between years 2014 and 2022 (generations 2010–2018), sought to capture data regarding their current employment status, field of employment, job satisfaction, relevance of acquired academic knowledge and skills

to their current careers, previous work experience, relative job stability and perceived job search difficulty. In addition to that, the objective was to determine the proportion of respondents who are currently teaching English, prevalent modes of English language instruction, motivations to become teachers, as well as the years of teaching experience, job satisfaction and perceived greatest challenges across mainstream education, private sector and online teaching. The final open-ended question served to elicit suggestions for advancing the professional status of English language teachers and for attracting new generations to the teaching profession.

## **2. The traditional role of English graduates as EFL teachers**

Teaching is nowadays generally regarded as a challenging and stressful profession often accompanied by inadequate compensation and low status (Johnston 1997; Mercer 2020; Vizek Vidović et al. 2005; Xue 2022). For example, in a study of job satisfaction among Serbian secondary school teachers, nearly 90% of respondents reported being partially (45.36%) or entirely dissatisfied (42.62%) with their earnings (Ugrinović et al. 2015: 201). Conversely, teachers seem to be burdened with an ever-growing number of responsibilities, including large amounts of paperwork, mandatory professional development, participation in various school councils, teams and projects (Jošić et al. 2014: 237; Vizek Vidović et al. 2005). Furthermore, they feel that their efforts are not appreciated not only by society as a whole, but by the increasingly intrusive and sometimes disrespectful parents. This additionally undermines teachers' authority in the classroom and encourages disruptive student behaviour (Jošić et al. 2014: 238). Recent cases of both parents and students physically attacking teachers in Serbian schools and a tragic primary school shooting in which a fourteen-year-old student killed nine fellow students and the school guard further illustrate these concerns.

Although not sufficiently researched, English language teaching also appears to be a marginalized profession performed under difficult conditions. Based on life history interviews with 17 EFL teachers in Poland, Johnston found that most of them needed to take on several jobs to sustain themselves financially, which often led them to mock the concepts of altruism and devotion to the service traditionally associated with teaching (Johnston 1997; cf. Mercer 2020: 1063). The

socioeconomic factors, therefore, triggered the portrayal of the occupation as “permeable” (Maley 1992, as cited in Johnston 1997: 698) in that the entry into it was typically accidental (e.g. prompted by the love for and study of the English language) and the exit was constantly pending. This is also reflected in the figures from the US and the UK which show that one in five teachers will leave the profession within three years of entry (Richardson & Watt 2006: 28).

A similar pattern has been observed not only in mainstream education, but also among those working in the private sector, including expatriate native English teachers and TESOL professionals in target cultures (Mercer 2020; Moodie & Greenier 2024; Priddis et al. 2013). In fact, in the context of profit-driven ELT industry, teachers often experience additional concerns as their job satisfaction and well-being are commonly overlooked in favour of increasing financial gain. To illustrate, respondents in a study by Mercer (2020) all cited low pay, absence of union representation and inadequate working conditions in terms of zero-hours contracts, lack of job security and investment in teachers and resources, understaffing and excessive working hours in private schools in Malta as the main contributors to the profession’s low perceived status as well as their various personal struggles.

The situation seems to be somewhat more favourable in predominantly ESL contexts. Although many teaching jobs are part-time and without benefits, 64% of ESL-related jobs and 81% of EFL-related jobs were reported to have adequate or more than adequate salaries by 250 alumni who completed a U.S. university TESOL graduate programme between 1973 and 2008 (Priddis et al. 2013). Nevertheless, it is indicative that over career spans of up to 35 years, they spent only 53% of their overall career time in TESOL-related employment, which authors put down to either difficult working conditions reported for some TESOL jobs or possibly to the subjects’ career-related objectives which do not entail stable, long-term teaching positions (pp. 14–15).

Finally, regardless of this bleak portrayal of the current status of the teaching profession, including English language instruction, it is important to stress that teaching remains one of the most inherently rewarding and fulfilling occupations. For instance, despite their previously cited profound dissatisfaction with their earnings, almost 80% of secondary school teachers in the study by Ugrinović and colleagues reported being completely (36.4%) or partially (42.52%) satisfied with their jobs, with two-thirds of them stating they would choose the same career path were they at the beginning

of their careers (Ugrinović et al. 2015: 204). The investigation of primary school teachers' (1334 class teachers and 2134 subject teachers) and 1044 high school teachers' perceptions of their initial teacher education and the teaching profession in the neighbouring Croatia revealed that the main sources of teachers' satisfaction lay in the appeal of working with children and adolescents (around 40% of all teachers), followed by the opportunity to impart knowledge (e.g. 28% of grammar school teachers) and support their overall development (e.g. 34% of vocational high school teachers) (Vizek Vidović et al. 2005). These reasons, in fact, align with the most frequently cited motives for entering the teaching profession (see Đorđević 2022), all of which are represented in the so-called FIT-Choice Model (Watt et al. 2012), used in this study as a framework for organising data on the factors influencing career choice in teaching.

Nevertheless, at the risk of further deterring prospective candidates from pursuing the teaching career, the focus on its negative aspects in various contexts was necessary to explain the existing or impending shortages of (English) teachers, especially in the public sector in the region and beyond, and mainly due to the declining motivation of graduates to enter the profession. For example, Johnston cites Tann (1994) and Drury (1994), who estimated that only 35% and 60% of graduates of the recently established teacher training colleges in Poland, respectively, went into state schools (in Johnston 1997: 698). The author further explains that the figures are even more unsettling when considering subsequent attrition and, above all, the fact that these institutions were introduced primarily because "hardly any graduates of university English departments were entering teaching" (Johnston 1997: 698).

Since there is very little data in the literature regarding this trend and none for the context of Serbia, one of the goals of this paper is to determine to what extent this may be the case at the largest department of this kind in the country. Certainly, the available figures for candidates applying to study English language, literature and culture there, which dropped by 42.58% in just over a decade,<sup>2</sup> warrant a thorough investigation of the career patterns of the recently graduated alumni. This could inform the potential necessary changes not only in the curriculum, but more comprehensively in society and its education system as well.

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<sup>2</sup> Based on the official final ranking lists from the 2012 and 2024 entrance exams

### 3. Non-traditional careers of English graduates

The postindustrialist era of globalisation, with its transnational corporations, international networks and the application of science, technology and information management as the driving forces behind economic growth has emphasised the necessity of effective communication across cultures (Warschauer 2000: 511). This has led to significant changes in employment patterns and the roles of language specialists, who are now commonly involved in a variety of fields, including teaching and research, translation and interpreting, text production and editing, project management, international sales and marketing, media and public relations, government and diplomatic services, often assuming several areas of responsibility within the same job (Gagalang 2020: 461; Helmersen et al. 2008: 11).

These changes are particularly relevant for English graduates as the new economic order, termed *informationalism* by Castells (as cited in Warschauer 2000: 512), presupposes the ability to communicate in the global lingua franca in order to be actively involved in it. The evolving job markets in developing countries are further shaped by the influx of Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industries and foreign companies, which put a premium on high English language proficiency among their workforce. In fact, preliminary findings of a study investigating non-traditional career paths of English-major graduates in Vietnam show that nearly 35–40% pursue careers in fields such as business, technology and international relations (Thao & Thuy 2024).

Apart from excellent communication skills which are considered a top priority for 21<sup>st</sup>-century employers, other attributes commonly highlighted in the literature as essential for graduates include employability skills and characteristics such as analytical and critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, creativity, initiative and enterprise, information literacy, intercultural understanding, self-confidence, integrity, self-discipline and flexibility (Gagalang 2020: 463; Sánchez & López 2022: 119; Vu et al. 2022; Yen et al. 2023: 1271). Some authors stress that these soft skills are precisely what an English-major education cultivates (Thao & Thuy 2024; Sánchez & López 2022: 119). For example, in a study conducted in Vietnam, 37 out of 67 interviewees emphasised how their English studies equipped them with cognitive and analytical skills necessary for roles outside their area of expertise. One of them noted that their background in English literature, particularly

in text analysis and creation, was invaluable in public relations, while for another, the critical thinking and communication skills fostered in their programme, proved indispensable for the respondent's role in project management (Thao & Thuy 2024: 13).

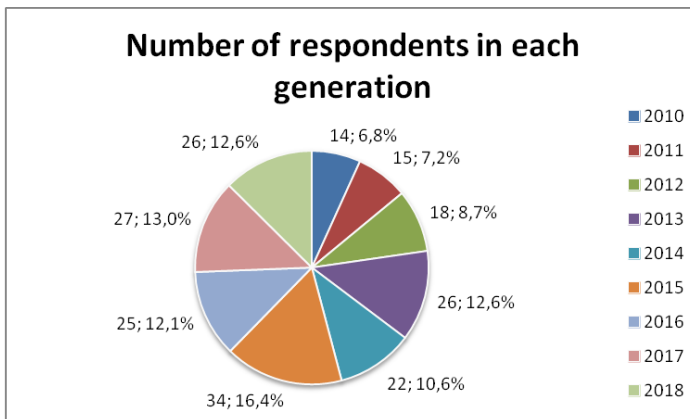
Despite the widely cited interdisciplinary benefits of English language education, studies from diverse contexts (e.g. European countries, the Philippines, Vietnam) investigating employers' perspectives on the attributes and skills of language specialists in general (Helmersen et al. 2008) or English language graduates in particular (Gagalang 2020; Yen et al. 2023), report varying levels of employer dissatisfaction, even with their oral and written communication skills in both the target language and their mother tongue. Other concerns include the personal qualities of (English) language specialists, which are often prioritised over work-related skills (Gagalang 2020: 465; Helmersen et al. 2008: 16), as well as deficiencies in information retrieval, planning, problem-solving, critical thinking, teamwork, self-confidence and devotion, and specialised skills or job-related identities (Yen et al. 2023). These specialised skills, technical knowledge and other non-linguistic competences are typically related to fields such as business, sales and marketing, media and management (Helmersen et al. 2008).

On the other hand, the lack of technical knowledge and a clear job-related identity understandably poses one of the principal challenges for English-major graduates themselves. Without traditional qualifications for their new roles, they often experience self-doubt and apprehension as they quickly learn the intricacies of their jobs and work to overcome biases and misconceptions about their capabilities in the workplace (Thao & Thuy 2024: 5). However, the so-called "imposter syndrome" tends to diminish over time as they transition from the state of uncertainty to resilience and adaptation, frequently emphasising the importance of mentorship and networking along the way (Thao & Thuy 2024: 16–17). Finally, a recurring theme in studies investigating the non-traditional careers of language specialists is the perceived gap between the theoretical knowledge acquired during studies and its practical applications in the real world, prompting both language graduates and their employers to call for more practical elements in academic curricula, including real-world simulations, internships and other forms of collaboration with industries (Gagalang 2020: 466, 468; Helmersen et al. 2008: 14; Thao & Thuy 2024: 12).

#### 4. Research methodologies

A Google Forms questionnaire was used to collect quantitative and qualitative employment-related and other data from alumni of the English Department, Faculty of Philology, Belgrade University, who began their undergraduate studies between 2010 and 2018. The investigation, conducted in September and October 2023, included the 2018 cohort as the most recent generation from which most students were expected to have completed undergraduate and possibly master's studies at the Department by that time. Initially, the inquiry aimed to include ten generations of alumni, but as email addresses for pre-2010 graduates were unavailable, the sample was confined to nine generations who were invited via email to complete the questionnaire anonymously.

In total, 207 alumni participated, with a relatively even distribution across generations (see Graph 1), except for the first three cohorts (2010 – 2012), which had a somewhat lower turnout rate. This may be attributed to email address changes over time, as contact information collected while these alumni were students in the author's Applied Linguistics and ELT Methodology courses may have become outdated, especially among earlier generations due to the greater passage of time.

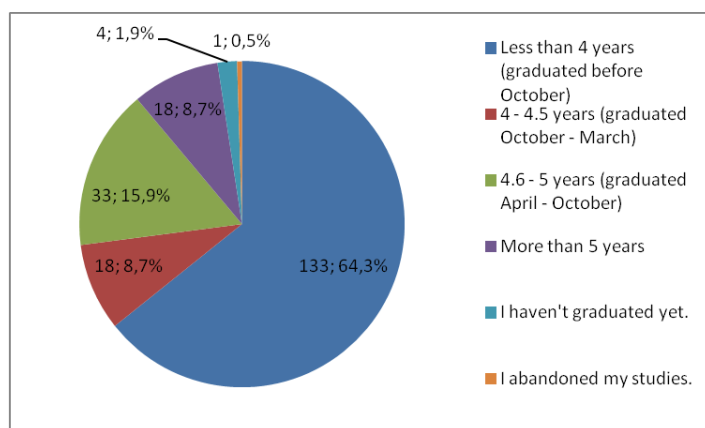


Graph 1. Distribution of alumni respondents across different generations



## 5. Survey results

Although not central to the inquiry into employment patterns among English graduates, interesting data emerged about the changing trends in the duration of their undergraduate studies and their academic achievement in terms of their Grade Point Average (GPA, average grade during studies) and their average Contemporary English grade. Before the Bologna Process was introduced in 2006, the average length of study at Belgrade University for 4-year study programmes was 6.76 years (Jarić & Vukasović 2009: 120). However, the data collected from our alumni respondents indicate that 64.3% completed their undergraduate studies in less than 4 years (see Graph 2). This is followed by 15.9% of respondents who took between 4.6 and 5 years to graduate (15.9%), while 8.7% finished their studies either in more than 5 years or between 4 and 4.5 years. At the time of inquiry, only 4 respondents had not yet graduated (1.9%) and one had abandoned their studies (0.5%).

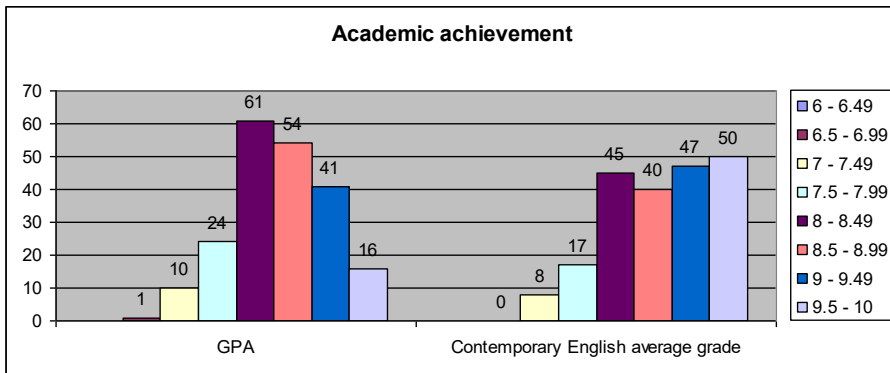


Graph 2. The duration of undergraduate studies

The relatively high reported GPA values presented in Graph 3 prompted an inquiry into the official differences between the student generations included in the study and the pre-Bologna generations, specifically in terms of their average grades. An inspection of the official records revealed a notable discrepancy. For example, while average GPA values for students from the 2014–2018 generations ranged from 8.3 to 8.57 ( $M=8.42$ ), those for pre-Bologna students enrolling at the turn of the millennium (2000–2004)

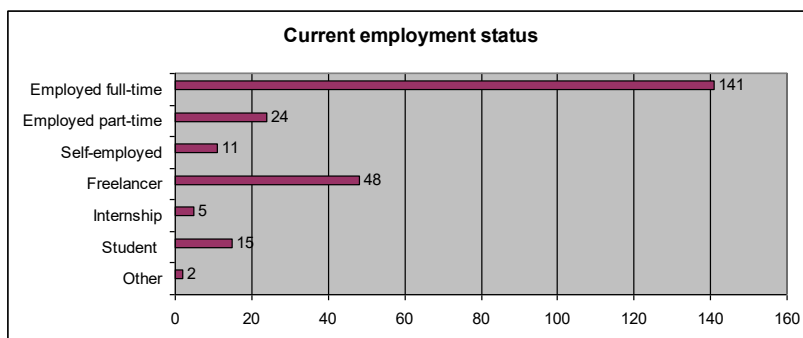
were more than half a point lower, at  $M=7.85$ . Furthermore, the difference between the GPA of the latest generation of graduates (2020: 8.88) and the GPA values for earlier pre-Bologna generations, such as 2002 (7.79), 2000 (7.75), 1999 (7.79), 1998 (7.78), etc., already exceeds 1 point.

Although data on alumni's average Contemporary English grades were not as readily available, it is evident that the highest grades predominate. This could arguably be explained by students' increased exposure to English, their earlier start in language acquisition, as well as changes in the assessment system, where the threshold for a passing grade was lowered to more than 50% following the introduction of the Bologna Process.



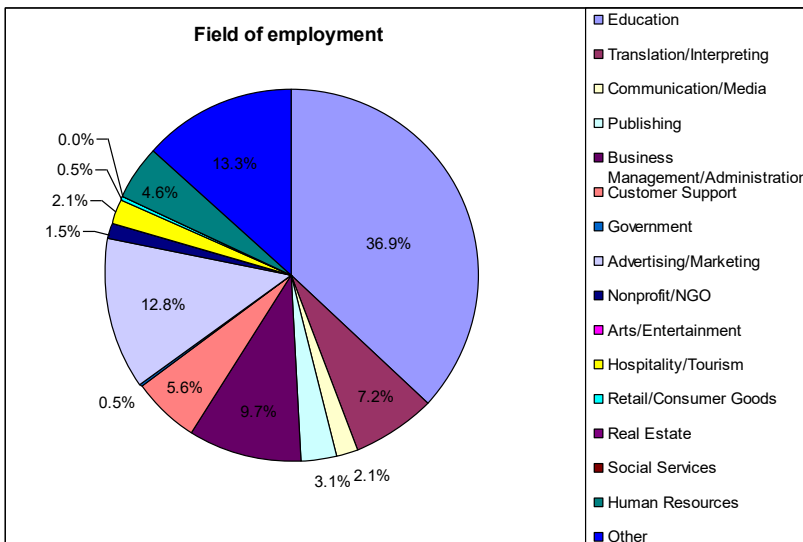
Graph 3. Academic achievement measured in Grade Point Average (GPA) and Contemporary English average grade

Regarding the current employment status of English graduates, an encouraging 94.2% are employed, which includes full-time and part-time employment, freelancing (defined in the questionnaire as “working independently on project-based assignments for clients”), internships (“gaining work experience related to education or career”) and self-employment (“owing a registered business”) (see Graph 4). Among these 195 alumni, 141 (72.3%) work full-time, 24 (12.3%) part-time, 11 (5.6%) are self-employed, 48 (24.6%) are freelancers, 5 (2.6%) are interns and 15 (7.7%) are both working and pursuing postgraduate studies. Additionally, 2 respondents selected the „Other” option, with one clarifying that they were „not officially employed”. The total percentage exceeds 100% because respondents were asked to select all options that applied to their current situation.



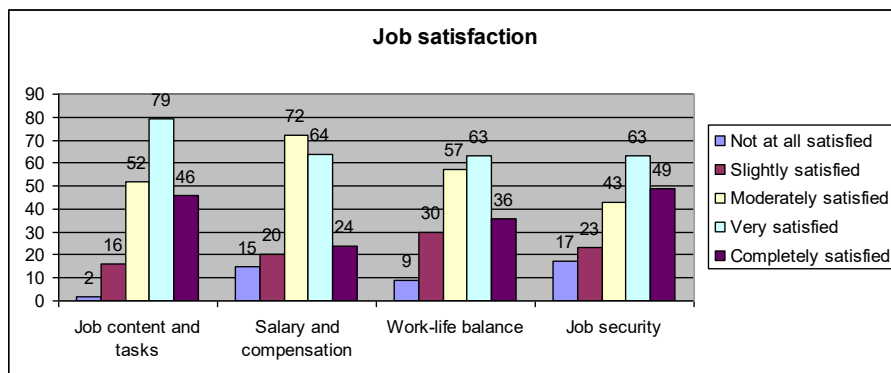
Graph 4. Current employment status

When asked about the field in which they currently work, respondents were given 15 options representing typical employment areas for English graduates (see Beal 2020; Sánchez & López 2022). As expected, the majority of alumni (36.9%) work in education, followed by those who selected the „Other” option (see Graph 5), highlighting the wide range of fields in which English graduates find employment. The traditionally well-represented sector of Translation and Interpreting, in which 14 respondents currently work (7.2%), was surpassed by the fields of Advertising/Marketing (12.8%) and Business Management and Administration (9.7%) and was closely followed by Customer Support (5.6%) and Human Resources (4.6%). Additionally, 6 respondents (3.1%) work in Publishing, while Communication/Media and Hospitality/Tourism each account for 4 respondents (2.1%). Non-profit organisations including NGOs employ 1.5% of the English graduates surveyed, while Government and Retail/Consumer Goods companies each employ one (0.5%). Notably, no alumni reported employment in Arts/Entertainment, Social Services or Real estate (see Graph 5).



Graph 5. Current field of employment

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with various aspects of their current job on a five-point scale (see Graph 6). Overall, they are most pleased with their job content and tasks ( $M=3.77$ ), as 64.1% of them report being either very or completely satisfied with what they do (40.5% and 23.6%, respectively). On the other hand, only 2 respondents are completely dissatisfied with their jobs (1%), while 16 are only slightly satisfied (8.21%). Dissatisfaction is more pronounced in relation to other job aspects, with more respondents indicating they are not at all or only slightly satisfied with their salary and compensation (7.7% and 10.3%, respectively), work-life balance (4.6% and 15.4%, respectively) and job security (8.7% and 11.8%, respectively). Nevertheless, most alumni are content with these aspects of their work, with nearly one-third of respondents very satisfied in each area: 32.8% with their earnings and 32.3% with work-life balance and job security. The proportion of moderately satisfied alumni declines across these three domains (36.9%, 29.2% and 22.1%, respectively), while the number of those completely satisfied rises (12.3%, 18.5% and 25.1%, respectively). Job security thus emerges as the second-highest rated aspect ( $M=3.53$ ), although it has a higher proportion of extreme satisfaction and dissatisfaction ratings compared to other areas, indicating a more polarised perception among respondents, who are overall least satisfied with remuneration ( $M=3.32$ ).

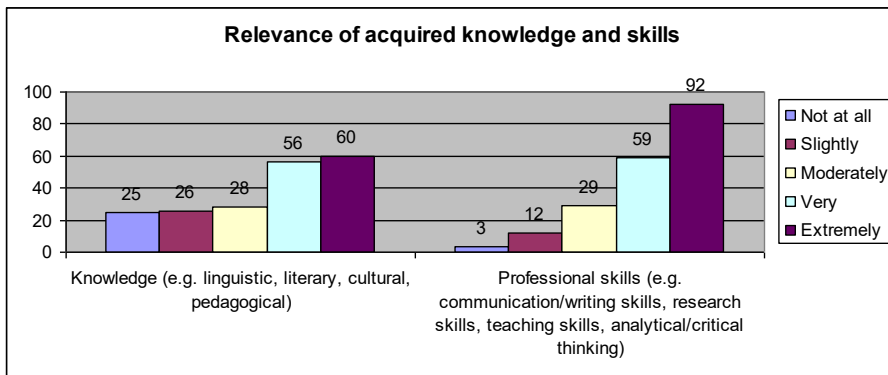


Graph 6. Job satisfaction

The inquiry also aimed to investigate how useful respondents perceive their undergraduate studies to be for their careers. In this respect, it is reassuring that the majority of alumni use English daily in their current jobs (82.6%), followed by those who use it frequently (10.3%) and occasionally (4.6%). Only a minority use it rarely (2.1%; 4 respondents) or never (0.5%; 1 respondent) in their workplace.

More specifically, respondents needed to indicate the extent to which the knowledge (e.g. linguistic, literary, cultural, pedagogical) and skills (e.g. communication and writing skills, research skills, teaching skills, analytical and critical thinking) acquired during their studies were relevant to their current careers (see Graph 7). It is important to stress that English language students follow a more or less unified curriculum at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade rather than selecting specialized tracks (e.g. linguistic, literary, cultural, translation, teaching) ensuring that all students gain a well-rounded education across these core areas. Nevertheless, since the findings point to an extreme versatility of professional fields and positions they hold within them, many of which are outside of their area of expertise, it is only logical to expect that some of the alumni will not be in a position to apply the acquired knowledge in their workplace. Namely, while almost 60% of English graduates claim that such knowledge is either extremely or very relevant to their current careers (30.8% and 28.7%, respectively), the remaining respondents are almost equally split between viewing it as only moderately relevant (14.4%), slightly relevant (13.3%) or not at all applicable in their workplace (12.8%).

Professional skills cultivated during their BA studies, on the other hand, demonstrate far wider applicability across diverse professions, with almost half of the sample reporting that these skills are extremely relevant (47.2%) and nearly one-third claiming that they are very relevant (30.3%) to their current jobs. Additionally, 14.9% believe that these skills are moderately relevant, 6.2% find them slightly relevant, while only 3 respondents (1.5%) do not perceive them as useful whatsoever for their work.



Graph 7. Relevance of acquired knowledge and skills

While the diversity of fields in which alumni are currently employed demonstrates a wide range of opportunities (see Graph 5), the variety of jobs they have held since graduation offers even deeper insight into the breadth of career paths available to English graduates. The table below presents the 23 job options included in the questionnaire, along with additional roles submitted by those who selected the „Other” option, provided that at least two individuals chose each of those job titles. The table also includes the number of participants who have held each job role, as well as the corresponding percentages based on a total of 207 respondents.

| Job roles/titles         | no. | %     | Job roles/titles                         | no. | %    |
|--------------------------|-----|-------|--|-----|------|
| English language teacher | 170 | 82.1% | Journalist                               | 9   | 4.3% |
| Translator/Interpreter   | 95  | 45.9% | Research/Data/<br>Business/Sales analyst | 8   | 3.9% |

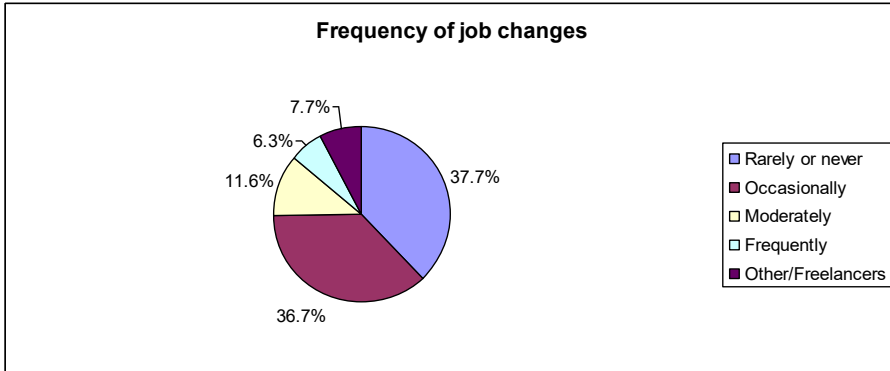
|  |    |       |                                     |   |      |
|--|----|-------|-------------------------------------|---|------|
| Freelancer/Self-employed               | 64 | 30.9% | Public Relations specialist         | 6 | 2.9% |
| Editor/Proofreader                     | 63 | 30.4% | Babysitter/Childcare provider       | 6 | 2.9% |
| Private tutor (excl. English)          | 58 | 28%   | Administrative assistant            | 4 | 1.9% |
| Content writer                         | 51 | 24.6% | Sales/Retail agent                  | 3 | 1.4% |
| Customer Service agent                 | 42 | 20.3% | Technical writer                    | 3 | 1.4% |
| Copywriter                             | 33 | 15.9% | Civil servant / Government employee | 2 | 1%   |
| Social media manager                   | 24 | 11.6% | Librarian                           | 2 | 1%   |
| Marketing professional                 | 23 | 11.1% | Grant writer                        | 2 | 1%   |
| Project developer/manager              | 19 | 9.2%  | Paralegal                           | 2 | 1%   |
| Human resources specialist             | 15 | 7.2%  | Account manager                     | 2 | 1%   |
| Academic researcher                    | 12 | 5.8%  | Business manager                    | 2 | 1%   |
| International organisations/ NGO staff | 11 | 5.3%  | Bartender                           | 2 | 1%   |

Table 1. Respondents' job roles

In addition to the jobs listed in Table 1, alumni also specified the following roles under the „Other” option, each mentioned by only one respondent: AML officer for cryptocurrency, compliance officer in a financial institution, cybersecurity engineer, exam invigilator/examiner/exam writer, IT consultant/auditor, SEO specialist, flight attendant, truck driver recruiter and front office manager.

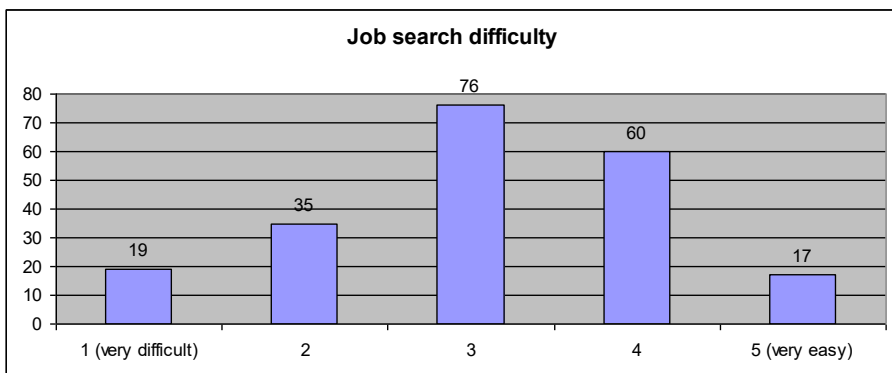
Regarding the frequency of job changes (Graph 8), nearly equal proportions of respondents reported that these were either rare or non-existent (37.7%) or occasional (36.7%), while a minority indicated

that they had changed jobs moderately (11.6%) or frequently (6.3%). Participants who primarily work as freelancers were invited to select the “Other” option, which was chosen by 7.7% of alumni (see Graph 8).



Graph 8. Job changes since graduation

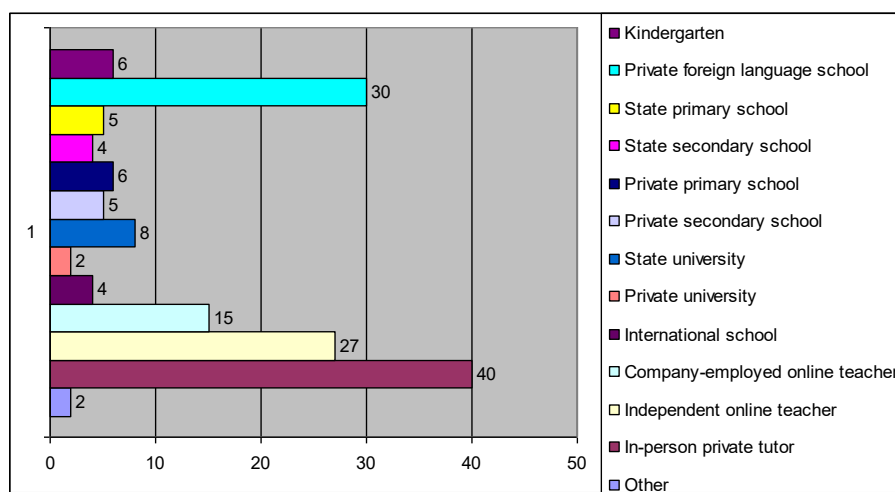
Another point of interest was the respondents' perceptions of the difficulty in finding suitable jobs based on their experiences (see Graph 9). The mean score on the 5-point scale was  $M = 3.1$ , with a substantial proportion of alumni selecting the midpoint (76; 36.7%). This was followed by 60 respondents (29%) who found job searching relatively easy, while the numbers of participants who reported it as either very difficult (19; 9.2%) or very easy (17; 8.2%) were lower and similar.



Graph 9. Perceived difficulty in finding suitable jobs



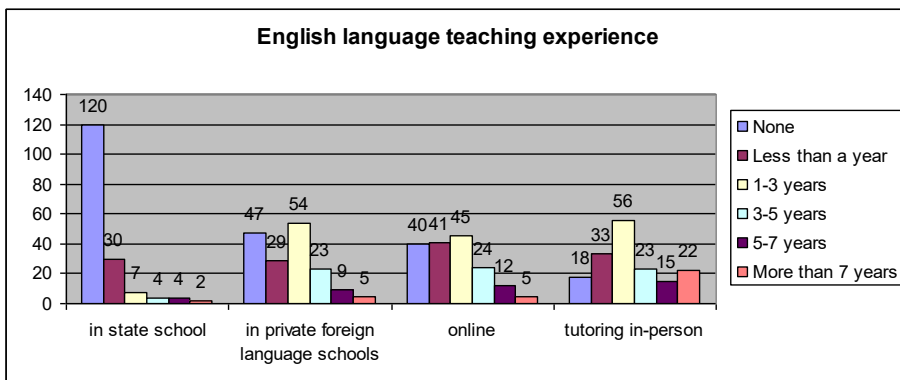
The second part of the questionnaire was directed at respondents who are either currently teaching English (38.2% of the total cohort) or have previous experience with English language instruction (68.8% of the remaining 128 participants). Among the 79 respondents actively engaged in English language teaching, Graph 10 reveals a clear tendency to combine various teaching modes. Online English instruction is the most prevalent, with 27 respondents working independently (34.2%) and 15 employed by companies (19%). Additionally, about half of the entire teaching cohort provides private, in-person English lessons (50.6%), while 38% teach in private foreign language schools. English language instruction in other settings is less common, involving fewer than 10 respondents each, including only 5 teaching in primary state schools (6.3%) and 4 in secondary state schools (5.1%).



Graph 10. Modes of English language instruction

While only 9 respondents are presently working in state schools (11.4% of those currently teaching), 47 report having taught English in these institutions at some point in their careers (28.14% of those with teaching experience), which is still significantly lower than the number of respondents who have provided English language instruction in private foreign language schools (71.86%), online (76.05%) or through in-person tutoring (89.22%). Moreover, most of them state that they have worked there for less than one year (63.83%), which may suggest

that at least some of them have served as substitute teachers for shorter periods. The numbers of respondents who have taught in private foreign language schools and online are similar (120 and 127, respectively), with comparable distributions of those who have been in these roles for over 3, 5 and 7 years (see Graph 11). Finally, nearly 90% of alumni teachers have provided private English lessons and the average length of this teaching experience is longer than in other modes of English instruction, likely because no formal qualifications are required for tutoring.



Graph 11. English language teaching experience

One of the survey questions focused on the motivations of English graduates to start teaching in state schools, private foreign language schools and online. Respondents were given 22 different options, including an ‘Other’ option, and were invited to select up to three main reasons for each mode of teaching in which they had experience. These options, listed in Table 2, were based on the FIT-Choice Model (Factors Influencing Teaching Choice; Watt et al. 2012), which takes into consideration aspects such as intrinsic job value (i.e. interest and enjoyment), social utility value (i.e. altruistic motives), personal utility value related to quality of life, self-perceptions in terms of teaching abilities, task return (reward aspects of the teaching profession), socialisation influences and the choice of teaching as a last resort (i.e. fallback career).

Based on the results presented in Table 2 (with percentages above 20% bolded), it is satisfying to observe that factors related to the intrinsic value of teaching – especially a love of imparting knowledge, closely followed by a passion for the English language – are most prevalent across all teaching

modes, with somewhat higher and similar proportions among state school and private foreign language school teachers (around 44% for the love of teaching and around 40% for the love of the language). In these groups, intrinsic motivations are followed by factors related to perceived personal characteristics and skills suited for teaching (34% and 30%, respectively), while online teaching appears to be primarily motivated by aspects related to the personal utility value of this mode of instruction, notably the possibility of working from home (55.9%) and flexible working hours (33.9%).

Considerations related to quality of life are also high on the list of priorities for state school teachers, with working hours and long holidays selected by 27.2% and 21.2% of these respondents, respectively. Another influential motivator is the opportunity to work with children and adolescents, which is more pronounced among state and foreign language school teachers (27.7% and 25.8%, respectively), as well as working with people in general, with holds high values across all teaching domains and points to a clear preference among online teachers for working with adult learners. The possibility of positively influencing young generations, as another aspect of the social utility value of teaching, is primarily important for respondents working in state schools (25.5%), while the impact of an inspirational teacher on their choice of teaching career is most noticeable among private foreign language schools teachers (20.8%).

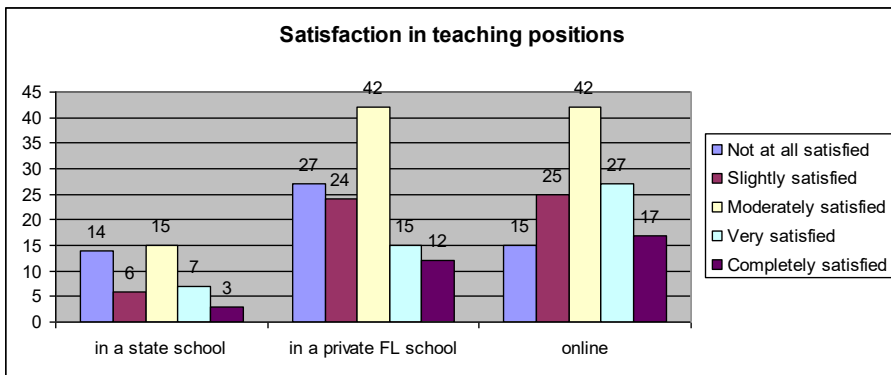
Finally, the results regarding teaching as a fallback career are concerning, with nearly one-fifth of private foreign language school and online teachers (18.3% and 17.3%, respectively) indicating that they chose teaching as a last resort. Nevertheless, an examination of individual responses reveals not only some overlap between groups, where certain alumni who view teaching as a fallback career refer to both modes of English language instruction, but also that, in most cases, they refer to these roles as past professional experiences.

| <b>FIT-Choice Model</b>       | <b>Motivations for teaching English</b>                                 | <b>State schools (47 respondents)</b> | <b>FL schools (120)</b>         | <b>Online (127)</b>               |
|-------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Intrinsic Value</b>        | The love of the English language  | <b>19 (40.4%)</b>                     | <b>46 (38.3%)</b>               | <b>44 (34.6%)</b>                 |
|                               | The love of teaching  | <b>21 (44.7%)</b>                     | <b>53 (44.2%)</b>               | <b>45 (35.4%)</b>                 |
|                               | Ongoing personal & prof. development                                    | 7 (14.9%)                             | 19 (15.8%)                      | 15 (11.8%)                        |
| <b>Social Utility Value</b>   | Working with children & adolescents/people in general/ foreign students | <b>13/12/2 (27.7%/25.5%/4.3%)/</b>    | <b>31/36/2 (25.8%/30%/1.7%)</b> | 14/ <b>37/10 (11%/29.1%/7.9%)</b> |
|                               | Impact on children and adolescents                                      | <b>12 (25.5%)</b>                     | 23 (19.2%)                      | 5 (3.9%)                          |
|                               | Contribution to society   | 8 (17%)                               | 15 (12.5%)                      | 9 (7%)                            |
| <b>Personal Utility Value</b> | Supporting under-privileged students                                    | 3 (6.4%)                              | 8 (6.7%)                        | 4 (3.1%)                          |
|                               | Working hours/Long holidays/Working from home                           | <b>13/10/0 (27.7%/21.3%/0)</b>        | 23/8 /6 (19.2%/6.7%/5%)         | <b>43/5/71 (33.9%/3.9%/55.9%)</b> |
|                               | Job security/Stable income  | 9/7 (19.1%/14.9%)                     | 6/5 (5%/4.2%)                   | 4/10 (3.1%/7.9%)                  |

|                                 |  |                 |                          |                     |
|---------------------------------|--|-----------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Self Perceptions</b>         | Personal characteristics/abilities                 | <b>16 (34%)</b> | 36 (30%)                 | 33 (26%)            |
| <b>Task Return</b>              | Salary (compensation level)                        | 4 (8.5%)        | 16 (13.3%)               | 16 (12.6%)          |
|                                 | It is a well-respected profession.                 | 3 (6.4%)        | 6 (5%)                   | 4 (3.1%)            |
| <b>Socialisation Influences</b> | The impact of a former T/ family member who is a T | 8/2 (17%/4.3%)  | 25/6 ( <b>20.8%/5%</b> ) | 9/0 (7%/0)          |
|                                 | Family/friends/others think I should be a T        | 5 (10.6%)       | 5 (4.2%)                 | 2 (1.6%)            |
| <b>Fallback Career</b>          | Teaching as a last resort                          | 5 (10.6%)       | <b>22 (18.3%) !</b>      | <b>22 (17.3%) !</b> |

Table 2. Motivations for teaching English according to the FIT-Choice Model

Survey results also show that overall satisfaction levels in teaching positions across different instructional contexts (Graph 12) are significantly lower than job satisfaction in respondents' various current fields of employment (Graph 6), as measured on a 5-point scale. Notably, even the mean score for remuneration ( $M=3.32$ ) as the lowest-rated aspect of current job satisfaction is almost 0.8 points higher than the satisfaction mean among state school teachers ( $M=2.53$ ), who represent the least satisfied cohort among those with English language teaching experience. Respondents who have taught English in FL schools report being or having been only slightly more content with their jobs ( $M=2.67$ ), while online teachers have the highest satisfaction mean, though just above 3 at  $M=3.05$ .



Graph 12. Satisfaction in teaching positions

The final closed-ended question explored challenges respondents encountered in their current or past roles in English language instruction. They were presented with 21 options, including an “Other” category, and asked to select up to three for each teaching modality in which they had experience. The results, presented in Table 3, show the challenges in descending order of votes received by those who have taught in state schools. Separate columns display the ranking for each option across all instructional contexts, with the top five choices bolded.

| Greatest challenges                            | State schools (47) | Rank       | Private FL schools (120) | Rank      | Online (127)      | Rank      |
|--|--------------------|------------|--------------------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|
| Inadequate salary or compensation              | 27 (57.4%)         | I          | 77 (64.2%)               | I         | 49 (38.6%)        | I         |
| The lack of student discipline                 | <b>25 (53.2%)</b>  | <b>II</b>  | <b>32 (26.7%)</b>        | <b>V</b>  | 16 (12.6%)        | VII       |
| General lack of respect for the profession     | <b>21 (44.7%)</b>  | <b>III</b> | 25 (20.8%)               | VIII      | 14 (11%)          | VIII      |
| Students' lack of motivation                   | <b>18 (38.3%)</b>  | <b>IV</b>  | 28 (23.3%)               | VI        | <b>25 (19.7%)</b> | <b>V</b>  |
| Students' disrespect for their teachers        | <b>17 (36.2%)</b>  | <b>V</b>   | 23 (19.2%)               | X         | 14 (11%)          | VIII      |
| Lack of opportunities for advancement          | 16 (34%)           | VI         | <b>51 (42.5%)</b>        | <b>II</b> | <b>41 (32.3%)</b> | <b>II</b> |
| Administrative workload                        | 15 (31.9%)         | VII        | 12 (10%)                 | XIII      | 4 (3.1%)          | XII       |
| Large classes                                  | 15 (31.9%)         | VII        | 5 (4.2%)                 | XVI       | /                 | /         |
| Cooperation with parents                       | 15 (31.9%)         | VII        | 24 (20%)                 | IX        | 8 (6.3%)          | X         |
| Emotionally & physically demanding profession  | 13 (27.7%)         | VIII       | 26 (21.7%)               | VII       | 20 (15.7%)        | VI        |
| Lack of professional development opportunities | 11 (23.4%)         | IX         | <b>38 (31.7%)</b>        | <b>IV</b> | <b>31 (24.4%)</b> | <b>IV</b> |

|  |            |     |                   |            |                   |            |
|--|------------|-----|-------------------|------------|-------------------|------------|
| <b>Limited access to resources &amp; materials</b>             | 11 (23.4%) | IX  | 14 (11.7%)        | XII        | 13 (10.2%)        | IX         |
| <b>Addressing special needs/ individualised learning plans</b> | 8 (17%)    | X   | 6 (5%)            | XV         | 7 (5.5%)          | XI         |
| <b>Communication with management</b>                           | 4 (8.5%)   | XI  | 17 (14.2%)        | XI         | 7 (5.5%)          | XI         |
| <b>Relationship with colleagues</b>                            | 3 (6.4%)   | XII | 7 (5.8%)          | XIV        | /                 | /          |
| <b>Working hours</b>   | /          | /   | <b>43 (35.8%)</b> | <b>III</b> | 14 (11%)          | VIII       |
| <b>Personal characteristics unsuited for teaching</b>          | /          | /   | 7 (5.8%)          | XIV        | 4 (3.1%)          | XII        |
| <b>Managing screen time &amp; digital fatigue</b>              | /          | /   | 4 (3.3%)          | XVII       | <b>41 (32.3%)</b> | <b>II</b>  |
| <b>Technical issues and/or platform-related challenges</b>     | /          | /   | 3 (2.5%)          | XVIII      | <b>40 (31.5%)</b> | <b>III</b> |
| <b>Coping with cultural or language barriers</b>               | /          | /   | 2 (1.7%)          | XIX        | 7 (5.5%)          | XI         |
| <b>Other</b>   | /          | /   | 4 (3.3%)          | XVII       | 4 (3.1%)          | XII        |

Table 3. Challenges in English language teaching



The table clearly indicates that the most significant challenge for all respondents with teaching experience, regardless of modality, is insufficient salary and benefits. The next highest-ranking issues for respondents from the public sector are all linked to challenging working conditions, stemming from students' lack of discipline (II), motivation (IV) and respect for teachers (V), as well as a general lack of respect for the profession (III). The more pressing concerns for those teaching in private foreign language schools and online are the lack of opportunities for advancement (II) and professional development (IV), along with context-specific difficulties, such as working hours for those teaching in the private sector (III) and managing screen time and digital fatigue (II) and technical issues and platform-related challenges (III) for online tutors. Only after these issues do problems related to student behaviour emerge, including student discipline (rank V and VII, respectively) and lack of motivation (rank VI and V, respectively). Following these challenges, state school teachers report a lack of opportunities for advancement (VI; 34%), along with an administrative workload, large classes and cooperation with parents, each selected by nearly one-third of the public sector cohort (31.9%). While these issues are less relevant for private school and online instructors, all English language teachers acknowledge the physically and emotionally draining nature of the profession, with 27.7% state school teachers, 21.7% private FL school instructors and 15.7% online tutors reporting this concern.

Finally, the responses to the final open-ended survey question regarding actions to enhance the professional standing of (English) language teachers and attract new generations to the teaching profession, closely reflect, confirm, expand upon and exemplify the major challenges previously discussed. A thematic analysis was conducted, with the assistance of ChatGPT to identify, categorise and refine the recurring themes from the survey responses:

### ***1. Salaries and financial compensation***

The most frequently mentioned theme across responses is the need for significantly higher salaries, performance-based incentives and benefits to reflect the workload, societal value and expertise required for teaching and to make the profession financially viable. Many participants also emphasised that salary improvements could have broader implications,

positively impacting job retention and enhancing societal respect for teachers.

R110: It is such a shame that one can make more money working in customer service positions than as a teacher.

## **2. Working conditions and professional respect and autonomy**

There is strong sentiment regarding the need for greater respect for the teaching profession, with requests for reduced administrative burdens, more control over grading and less influence from parents. A notable theme was the call for increased protection for teachers when managing challenging students and parents, alongside legal reforms to strengthen teachers' authority in the classroom. Some teachers voiced frustrations with students' limited motivation, noting that many see English learning merely as a grade requirement rather than a valuable skill for life and career opportunities. Additionally, those teaching in private language schools frequently mentioned the importance of job stability through formal employment contracts, as undeclared work and cash payments remain prevalent in the private sector.

R143: Regarding private schools, I think that we must respect our profession and ourselves more, and that we should not accept any inappropriate offers when it comes to salary and certain unacceptable conditions, such as not having our health insurance.

## **3. Institutional reform and broader socio-political changes**

Many believe that the government should play a proactive role in large-scale educational reform, including reducing class size, investing in educational infrastructure and teaching resources, providing continuous professional development opportunities and updating the curriculum. Others advocate for broader systemic socio-political changes, such as ensuring fair employment practices, raising public awareness about the role of teachers and promoting teaching as a respected career choice.

R105: Changing the professional standing of teachers requires a shift in the entire socio-political environment, especially in terms

of employee quality assurance, more just employment processes (where political affiliation of the candidate plays no role), better financial compensation, promotion of respect for the teacher among students, etc.

#### **4. Curriculum Modernisation and Career Path Diversification**

Some responses suggested modernising the university curriculum to include subjects and skills such as content creation, digital marketing and online teaching, aligning with diverse job opportunities beyond traditional teaching. Graduates often feel limited in their exposure to alternative career paths (e.g. corporate language roles, IT sector) and recommend that universities actively inform students of these options to broaden their career possibilities. For initial language teacher education, the focus should be on practical teaching skills and integrating technology to prepare candidates for contemporary classrooms. Respondents also believe that early exposure to teaching realities, through practica, internships and collaboration with alumni, could provide prospective teachers with realistic expectations and better prepare them for the profession's demands. Lastly, there was a call to raise educational and qualification standards to ensure high-quality language instruction and maintain professional integrity.

R90: I work in IT now. I had the opportunity to start because I speak fantastic English and it was “cheaper” to teach me job skills than to teach me English. Rebrand English as not a goal, but a means to a successful end. I had a leg up over numerous candidates that had “expert level knowledge” in their fields, but could not communicate it to the clients. Communication is key. English is key.

#### **6. Discussion**

Survey results confirm findings in the literature on the evolving career patterns of English graduates, characterised by their remarkable versatility across professional fields and roles (Helmersen et al. 2008; Sánchez & López 2022; Thao & Thuy 2024). The introduction of the Bologna system has enabled most students to enter the job market more quickly and arguably with greater confidence, bolstered by higher grades than

those of pre-Bologna generations. Consequently, the high employment rate of 94.2% is encouraging, especially considering that some are recent graduates or still pursuing postgraduate studies (7.7%). However, it is important to acknowledge that this relatively high percentage may have been influenced by self-selection bias, as unemployed alumni may have been less willing to participate in the survey. Additionally, while the majority of respondents are employed full-time (72.3%), nearly a quarter work as freelancers (either exclusively or in combination with other roles), and the option to work independently for clients likely contributes to the relatively low proportion of those unemployed.

The most intriguing finding is that, while most alumni expectedly work in the field of education (36.9%), the second-highest ranking category is the “Other” option (13.3%; c.f. Beal 2020: 81), which surpasses 14 other employment areas typically associated with English language studies, including Advertising/Marketing (12.8%) and Business Management/Administration (9.7%). This not only supports findings from other national contexts, which suggest that “a significant proportion of English-major graduates find themselves venturing into job roles that do not squarely align with their expertise” (Thao & Thuy 2024: 2), but also highlights the increasing difficulty in predicting the professional spheres in which they may find employment.

The list of jobs alumni have held since graduation further supports the versatility of their career choices, while also revealing patterns indicative of high attrition rates in traditional English graduate roles. Specifically, while 82.1% of respondents state that they have worked as English language teachers at some point in their careers, only 38.2% are currently engaged in English language instruction. This suggests that many may view teaching (both English and other languages or subjects) as a side job or a way to support themselves or supplement their income in the early stages of their careers. A similar trend is observed in translating and interpreting, where 45.9% of respondents have experience, compared to just 7.2% currently employed in this field, and in customer support, with 20.3% having worked as customer support agents, compared to 5.6% currently working in this sector. On the other hand, some of graduates’ job titles, such as content writer, SEO specialist, data analyst, cybersecurity specialist, IT consultant, AML officer for cryptocurrency, reflect more recent roles that have emerged largely due to technological advancements, the rise of the internet and changes in regulatory needs.

The most gratifying results were those related to graduates' current job satisfaction, particularly concerning their job content and tasks ( $M=3.77$ ), followed by job security ( $M=3.53$ ), work-life balance ( $M=3.45$ ) and salary and compensation ( $M=3.32$ ). These ratings were relatively high compared to overall satisfaction with current or previous teaching roles in state schools ( $M=2.53$ ), private language schools ( $M=2.67$ ) and, to some extent, online tutoring ( $M=3.05$ ). Although expected, these latter findings remain deeply concerning. The results suggest that, while most English graduates enter the teaching profession for the right reasons – primarily intrinsic and altruistic – they encounter significant barriers, including inadequate remuneration and poor working conditions. The difference in satisfaction scores, however, may at least partly reflect the contrast between current job satisfaction and past teaching experiences, which in some cases, were undertaken as a last resort rather than a career choice. Be that as it may, the qualitative data confirm these challenges and reveal additional problematic aspects not addressed in the survey questions. As a result, the number of alumni currently working in state schools is alarmingly low, representing only 4.35% of total respondents, which lends strong justification to widespread concerns about “Who is going to teach our children?”

Respondents have proposed a range of reforms across different levels, including curricular, academic, governmental, educational, legislative and national. While some initial steps have been taken – such as legal changes aimed at protecting teachers in their workplaces and an initiative led by eight deans of faculties that educate prospective teachers (including our own, Dr Iva Draškić Vićanović) to improve the status of teacher education programmes and preserve the education system in Serbia – much work remains to be done.

## **7. Conclusion**

As a society, we find ourselves caught between the unfavourable working conditions in most instructional contexts, which push English graduates to seek other professional paths, and the pressing need for future generations of highly qualified and dedicated teachers. As faculty, we are similarly torn between wanting the best for our alumni in their future careers and our responsibility to prepare a high-quality teaching force that, however,

may be unable or unwilling to fully apply their potential, knowledge and skills if these are not adequately appreciated and rewarded. Moreover, as educators we must keep up with the times by introducing necessary curricular innovations without compromising the high educational and qualification standards that our alumni expect and insist upon and without depriving future generations of the content and skills our graduates deem highly useful. Ultimately, it is only through broader socio-political changes that we can 'bring back the respect to the teaching profession' (respondent no. 92), thus enabling those genuinely motivated to pursue this career, while also presenting other students with a multitude of professional options ahead of them.

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