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Reducing Higher Education Drop-Out Rates in a Disadvantaged Region

Inroduction

Today, many universities in Hungary are in crisis due to the drastic decline in student numbers. There are universities where the decline is so high that the institutions have already been fighting for their existence. Due to the targeted higher education policies (EMMI Cselekvési term, 2016-2020; Goldfárthné, 2020; Government Decree 339/2022. IX. 7.), a slow growth process could be detected from 2019 to 2024 at the national level but not at every universities and regions. This reduction at the national level is partly attributed to demographic reasons, but several other reasons can be interpreted only in a socioeconomic context. It is not enough that fewer and fewer people enroll in higher education each year, but the dropout rate is also very high. Dropout is unsuitable for the individual, the university, or the state.

In recent decades, there has been much research that has examined higher education dropout and retention (Behr-Giese-Kamdjou, 2021,2020; Bean-Eaton, 2000; Pusztai-Szigeti ed. 2018, 202; Fónai, 2021; Nieuwoudt-Pedler 2021), and also many proved there is just little chance for disadvantaged children for mobility, for social advance despite living in an open society in terms of mobility in principle (Coleman et al., 1966; Borman-Dowling, 2010; Mogyorósi, 2012). Even the most recent research has also proved that for many people living in poverty and being socially marginalized, there is almost no hope for getting out of poverty and segregation on their own, and their children are waiting for a similar life, inheriting their parents' social position (Gábos, Tomka, Tóth, 2021; Gábos, Ciani, Tomka, 2021; Limani et al., 2021).

Several researchers also have already examined why disadvantaged children drop out of university, why they underperform at exams, and why they leave the university from one semester to another even though they had entered university with great effort and talent (Sosu-Pheunpha, 2019; Hjorth et al., 2016; Rumberger-Lim, 2008; Costa et al., 2018). They concluded and tried to find solutions to school failure, but primarily as experts, from their point of view. There are only a few exceptions when the researchers were curious about the experience and opinion of the other side, namely the dropout students (Torkos, 2005; Forray, 2015; Ceglédi, 2018; Hüse-Ceglédi, 2018). In 2020/2021, 287,500 students were registered in 62 higher education institutions in Hungary. Despite this, only 24.6% of the Hungarian population aged 15-74 had a higher education degree in 2021, compared to the EU average of 28% (KSH, 2022).

To explore the reasons and factors contributing to the dropout of disadvantaged students and graduates, they were asked how they could have done well in their studies, how they could have gotten university degrees, what inhibitory factors they could encounter, how they could have been resilient students (Gonçalves, 2017), and what they thought the key to their success was. The question is no more what experts think is practical but what students do. The questions are how they explain their school success, why they think they were successful in higher education, what factors positively influenced their school achievement, what motivated them to learn, and what made them continue their studies.

Due to the negative tendencies of recent years, the time has come to recognize that only the researchers or experts dealing with education policy are the only ones who have to find solutions (this way of thinking and such policies have just partly been successful during the past years) but also the successful graduates who were potentially at risk. They could help show the proper way of higher education policies, telling us their experience, feelings, and needs. Researchers who come from different social classes than these students at risk are not able to think with the disadvantaged students' heads. Culture, origin, history, social strata, social status, socioeconomic context, and many

other things can influence thinking and the meaning of life and, consequently, their attitude to higher education studies. That is why only disadvantaged students and graduates were interviewed in this research, not experts, and that is why the qualitative method was chosen. The findings and consequences are based only on student interviews and individual experiences. Now, this study analyses their experience in only one dimension, namely the mentor role, how it helped their learning progress during their university years, their integration into campus life, and last but not least, their way of socialization into an "intellectual milieu" in society (Geiger, 1975; Gramsci, 1975; Bourdieu, 1975; Bocsi, 2013). In summary, this paper examines the mentor role and its efficiency in avoiding higher education dropout from the perspective of at-risk students and graduates who have participated in mentoring programs.

This paper has two more significant parts: the first part reveals the background of statistics of higher education student enrollment decline and dropout, then presents the main concepts of education policies concerning the number of higher education students and dropout dropouts; the second part analyses the interviews made from the perspective of disadvantaged mentored. Regarding the social science research method, retrospective biography research was applied as a qualitative method for thematic life course research, namely narrative interviews (55 people) focusing on a special segment of life. Lastly, the type of disadvantages, the mentor roles, the mentor fields, and the mentoring could be differentiated could be differentiated level could be differentiated. I collected the indicators that supported their school achievement and examined the mentor role and its efficiency in avoiding higher education dropouts. Of course, not only can disadvantaged students drop out, but I have dealt with them only this time. I was also interested in whether a mentor system at a higher education level is needed, effective, and has a raison d'être, or is it just a sounding, trendy, empty attempt like many other inefficient practices before.

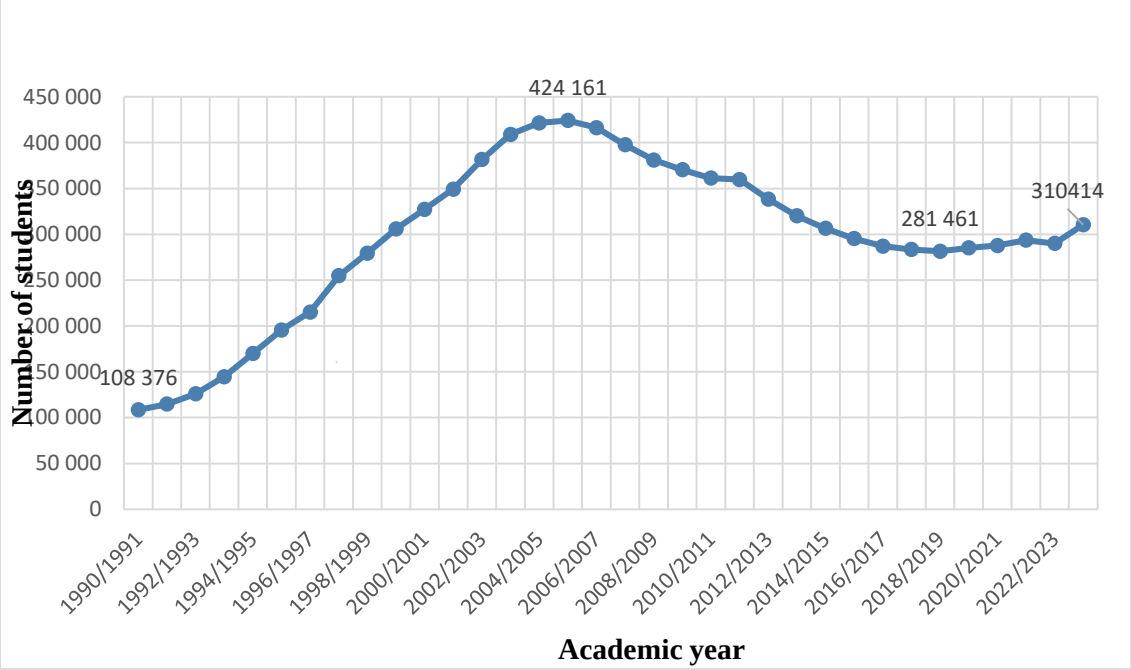
Changes in students number in recent decades in Hungary

International statistical studies have repeatedly shown for many decades since the seventies that the expansion of higher education is continuous (Craig, 1981; Craig et al., 1982; Meyer et al., 1979, 1992; Shofer-Meyer, 2005). However, this does not mean that this is true in all cases. Around the turn of 2000, the question was when the expansion of higher education would reach a breaking point where it stopped (Kozma, 2004). Furthermore, today, it is also a question of what will happen next if it starts to stagnate or even decline, as has recently happened in some European countries. Therefore, the current state and tendencies of expanding higher education are worth re-examining.

Nowadays, many universities in Hungary experience a drastic decline in student numbers. Between 1990 and 2001, the number of students in higher education in Hungary increased threefold (before 1990, elite higher education: 18-22 years old participation of higher education less than 10% of the age group; 2001 mass higher education: up to 35% age group participation) (Derényi, 2012; Hrubos, 2006; Kozma, 2010; Lukács, 2001; Major, 2001; Polónyi, 2004; KSH 1990-2001) This increase was a consequence on the one hand of a demographic wave, between 1974 and 1980, that reached higher education, on the other hand of the fact that many people could not go on higher education owing quotas limiting the number of admissions that existed before 1990, the change of regime. This latter could be detected in the outstandingly rising number of correspondence students (Farkas, 2002; Kozma, 1998).

The increase in the number of students took about 15 years, from 1990 to 2005, but from 2005 to 2018, a drastic decrease (35 percent decrease, from 424.161 to 281.461 students) could be detected (Derényi-Temesi, 2016; KSH, 1990-2024). This reduction is partly attributed to demographic reasons, but several other reasons can be interpreted in a socioeconomic context. Due to the targeted higher education policy, we can witness a slow growth process again from 2019 (285.110 higher education students) to 2024 (310.414 higher education students). (Fig. 1)

Figure 1: **Number of students in higher education 1990-2024**



Source: KSH 2024

Overall, the number of students in the higher education age group 18-24 has decreased the most (full-time students). Although this change varies by county and region, the decline in the number of students in higher education is on the rise everywhere, except in the traditional universities of the capital and some big cities (KSH, 2005-2024). There are universities where the decline is almost 80 percent. In these cases, the institutions are already fighting for their existence.

Experience shows that the larger universities have been able to handle it, but some of the smaller ones have been forced to close their doors, and others are still struggling to survive with minimal student numbers. The latter universities are trying to develop strategies that will re-engage students. The question is how to increase the number of both enrolling and graduating students at small universities.

The country's largest, oldest, and most popular universities with the highest prestige do not need such strategies, especially if it is in an economically prosperous region, as most of their majors are still over-applied. However, smaller universities, especially in socially disadvantaged areas, need to invent survival strategies. Today, there are several ideas, and one of them is to attract and retain students previously underrepresented in higher education, namely disadvantaged students. Few of these young people have entered higher education in the past and did not form a significant group, which is why they have not been given special attention. Today, they are present in increasing numbers in higher education in these disadvantaged areas, and their high dropout rates are a significant and serious threat to their higher education institutions.

Current social problems, crises, and other factors that affect higher education student numbers

The most common social problems that have changed the intention to continue learning at higher education are the following: declining birth rate, a kind of labor market crisis (changed labor market needs, i.e., labor shortage in case of essential skilled workers), the changing social structure (widening lower social strata) and the pandemic (covid). Nowadays, these changes negatively affect the number of higher education students. By examining them, we can better understand these effects.

The demographic crisis, namely aging society, has existed since the 80s (permanent population of Hungary in 1990: 10,37 million people; 2021: 9,89 million people; 2024: 9,585 million people) (KSH, 1990, 2021, 2024). It means a dramatic increase in the proportion of older people and a continuous

decrease in the number of births. The decrease in the number of full-time higher education students is almost precisely to the same extent as the number of students in society due to the demographic data (OECD, 2008-2024).

The labor market crisis also exists in Hungary. Although a 25–64-year-old with a tertiary degree with income from full-time, full-year employment earns more than the same with secondary school education, after secondary school, many young enter the labor market instead of continuing their education (OECD, 2008-2024). A reason for this is that there is currently a severe shortage of skilled workers in the industry and service sector, so high wages are already offered to beginners which is very attractive. The problem is not unemployment but rather labor shortages, affecting higher education participation.

The Pandemic (COVID) crisis has led to several processes affecting the further education of high school graduates. Higher education institutions switched to online training for several semesters, which, on the one hand, was unattractive for some young people. On the other hand, many families got in such a financial situation due to complete shutdowns that they could not afford to let their children continue their education.

Lastly, the social structure crisis is also a problem concerning further education. In the last decade, an unexpected process has started. The social strata have begun to move further and further apart, and the gap between the social strata has begun to widen. Moreover, the biggest problem is the widening of the lower social strata (e.g., because of economic crises), to which most families with children belong. As a result of this process of social declassification, many families are unable and unwilling to invest in higher education studies despite the many student scholarships and loans. Their children lack opportunities in education and life. Social class characteristics shape their achievement, school outcomes, further education, and career.

Change of maintenance and efficiency

By the academic year 2021-2022, Hungary's most significant state universities had been transferred to foundations. A key element in the renewal of higher education is the change of model, and the overall aim is to provide universities with a flexible background to the competitiveness of the region and the country in response to local social and economic development needs (Magyar Kormány, 2021). This transformation aims to make the universities stronger, more self-sufficient, and more survive. These changes intend to manage the universities more efficiently. As a result, the institutional management of the universities will be taken much more strictly. This means that there will be cost-benefit calculations, and it is clear that students generate most of the revenue for universities. The problem is twofold because not only has the number of students decreased in the last decade, but the number of dropout students has also increased, leading to a significant loss of revenue for universities. Of course, there are also other sources of revenue, e.g., research and development, cooperation with companies, real estate utilization, etc. Professors can take part in several of them. It has already been expected so far, but professors are much more expected to be actively involved in these extracurricular activities. Apart from the mentioned sources and focusing on the number of students as a serious source of revenue, professors, and teachers can also play a role in increasing it, e.g., as a mentor.

Dropout rates in higher education

Measuring dropout, especially international comparisons, is difficult, based on different definitions and calculation methods. Nonetheless, standardized comparative analyses use specific definitions, showing that dropout rates in Hungary are higher than average (OECD overviews, 2008-2024). Another problem is that it is not enough to be that high, but it is still increasing at some universities (KSH statistics). Looking at the last 10 years, the dropout rate in Hungary has been 10 percentage points higher in international comparisons, compared to the average rate of 25-30 percent in the EU member states (Vida, 2021).

Another problem is that the number of passive semesters also increases in Hungary. Moreover, not only is the incidence of these semesters high, but the average number of passivated semesters is also high, especially in the case of non-full-time students. The danger of a passive semester is that the student gets used to moving away from learning during this time. Local experience shows that the longer you are in your passive semester, the less likely you are to return to higher education. In addition, students in the passive semester are much harder to reach because they do not have personal contact with their teachers. From a mentor's point of view, this is a severe problem.

Factors Contributing to High Dropout Rates in Higher Education

Socioeconomic Barriers impact on dropout rates

One of the most important contributors to university student dropout rates is financial instability. Research shows that university students from low-income family backgrounds are more likely to drop out of higher education before graduation due to the cost of tuition, living expenses, and job demands (Tinto, 2012). Financial support programs, scholarships, intensive training, and work-study options have been identified as important interventions to reduce these barriers (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013).

Academic Preparation and Institutional Challenges

Lack of academic preparation, often associated with inadequate higher education, affects university student retention rates. Many poor students struggle with essential curriculum content, leading to low grades and disengagement (Kuh et al., 2006). Institutional challenges, including limited access to academic counseling, inadequate student support services, inadequate research support programs, and large class sizes, exacerbate the risk of dropping out (Braxton, 2000).

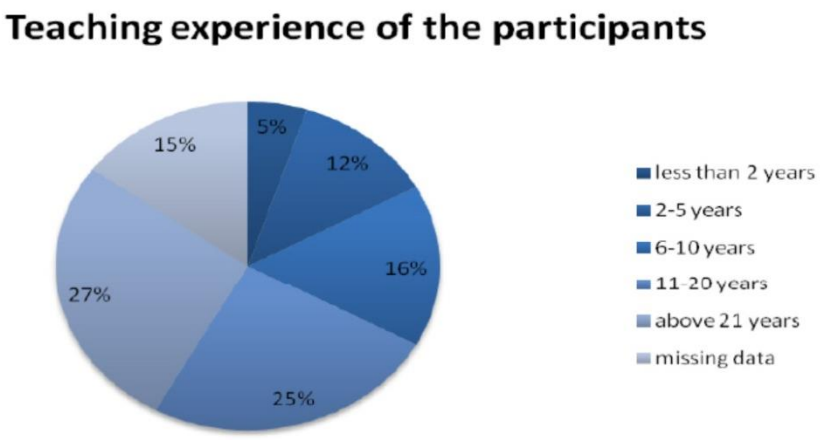
Psychological Factors and Student Engagement

Social integration plays a significant role in student retention. According to Tinto's Student Integration Model (1975), students who feel connected to their academic community are more likely to persist in their studies. Many students in deprived areas face challenges such as family responsibilities, mental health problems, and lack of peer support, all of which contribute to their dropout from higher education (Wilcox et al., 2005).

Teaching experience impact on Dropout Rates in Higher Education

The researcher studied 8 HEIs, and the number of respondents in institutions ranged from 1 to 16. 76% of the respondents were teachers, 4% were research fellows, and 20% were administrative staff. More than half of the respondents had more than 11 years of teaching experience, while 32% were teachers with less experience, as shown in Fig. 2.

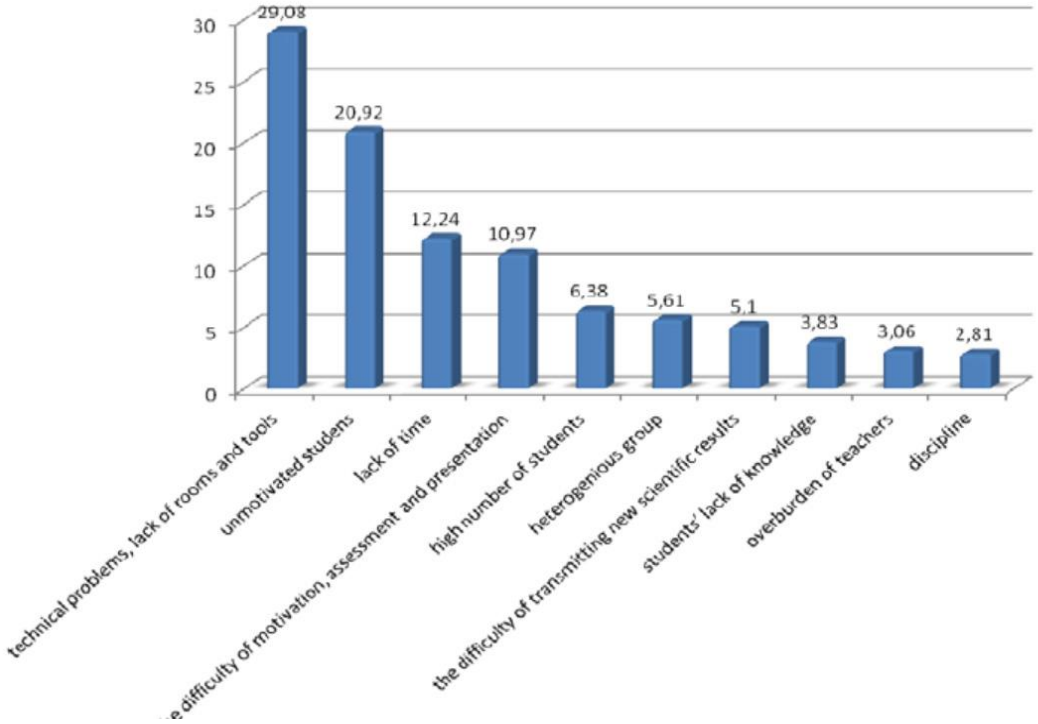
Figure 2: **Teaching experience impact on Drop-Out Rates**



Source by Anikó Kálmán: Comparative analysis of trainers' needs in higher education network, 2013

According to Anikó Kálmán (2013), most respondents (29.1%) highlighted technical problems that caused difficulties during teaching, meaning that the technical background was inadequate, the classrooms were not suitable for teaching, or the lack of sufficient and appropriate tools for practical work in Figure 2. This response was followed by listing unmotivated students (20.9%) as having difficulties in teaching. The third difficulty was the discrepancy between the amount of curriculum and the course duration: lack of time (12.2%). The next category included teachers' inability to motivate students, how to promote interest in the subject, and how to assess students (11%). The same proportion (5-6%) listed the difficulties of high student numbers, heterogeneous groups, professional development, and the delivery of new scientific results. These answers included the excessive workload of teachers, lack of knowledge of students, and difficulties in discipline (3%).

Figure 3: **Difficulties during the teaching situation**



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Conclusion

Disadvantaged students must overcome obstacles that other people, such as teachers and fellow students, would not even think of. Most of them cannot rise above the disadvantages on their own; they need external help. They usually cannot expect help from their family or environment, so

universities, government entities, or other supporting services must increase opportunities for them. It emerged from the research that the personal presence of university teachers in the helping process has a prominent effect on the disadvantaged students' development. University professors and assistant professors are a special group who can take a profound role in it as they have the advantage of being in regular personal contact with the students on at least a weekly basis. Furthermore, in the case of a personal relationship, professors know the students very well, and the students open up sooner; they talk more easily about their problems concerning their studies and are more receptive to accepting help. Of course, besides teacher mentoring, peer support, and private mentoring programs have also an important role to play in the same way. The university mentoring system needs to be developed in the future, and many professors and teachers who feel it is possible need to be involved. It can mean patronage, mentoring, and holding individual or customized preparation courses.

Looking to the future, the question of subsequent research could be where these resilient graduates are now. Could they succeed in the labor market and life without a mentor? Isn't there a danger of making them less independent and individual? In their case, doing a career and life path examination a few years later would be worthwhile. I would like to know whether they could stand their place in society on their own, whether they could position themselves according to their education, and whether they were satisfied and successful. Later, can they break out of their low social class and move into a higher social one? If mentors detach after completing their higher education studies, will they still be able to progress in life? Alternatively, get used to getting help and become over-mentored. Moreover, how to avoid over-mentoring? These can be the questions of the following research helping to create the suitable role of mentor and to create the stable and independent living of the mentored.

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