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Open books, closed doors? – changes in learning intentions based on data from large-sample youth surveys

Studying young people's learning intentions is essential for both individual development and societal cohesion. Many authors have linked meritocracy and competitiveness to the ability to meet global challenges. In the international literature, two opposing yet parallel processes have previously been used to explain young people's learning intentions. On the one hand, based on human capital theory (Becker, 1964; Marginson, 2019), 15–29-year-olds view learning as a rational investment: according to the “success-seeking” approach, higher education is statistically associated with a lower risk of unemployment and higher lifetime income (OECD, 2023). In the “failure-avoiding” perspective, however, the phenomenon of “graduation inflation” (Collins, 1979; Brown et al, 2011) emerges, according to which young people are forced to expand their learning space because the value of the “entry ticket” (e.g. a degree or vocational qualification) required to enter the labor market has devalued, so that higher-level or additional training is needed to remain competitive. Learning intentions go beyond formal education. EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 emphasizes non-formal learning, and young people are often drawn to short, flexible courses that support swift adaptation to technological changes.

Based on all this, we aim to use data from the so-called large-sample youth research to examine how Hungarian young people relate to further learning as an activity; we believe these data can make a valuable contribution to understanding the issue. The key question of our research is what the learning motivation of young people is like, and how it is changing, and to answer the question of whether Hungarian society is becoming meritocratic, that is, how the mechanisms of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1978) and the phenomena of cultural mobility (DiMaggio, 1998) shape the learning motivation of young people. In light of this, in our research, we also test to what extent the learning aspirations of young people in the Hungarian context are fundamentally determined by the strong selection effect of the school system, and to what extent the learning intentions of 15–29 year olds are influenced by the cultural capital of their parents (cf.: Bourdieu's habitus theory). That is why we interpret the question not primarily as an intention to study at a higher level, but as a general motivation for learning.

Due to the heterogeneity of the examined age group, we also aim to map age differences in intentions to continue learning, as these can vary significantly across life situations. For 15–19-year-olds (high school age group), the question can be interpreted primarily in the context of forced careers and choices. The intention to continue learning here is often to comply with social expectations, where the answer “no” indicates the risk of dropping out. In the 20–24-year-old age group, learning is already a conscious career-building strategy. The need to change professions or the dilemma of continuing to a master's degree appears. In the 25–29-year-old group, the question is often placed within the framework of adult education and learning alongside work, with a view to mobility. In addition, we aim to map the impact of sociodemographic characteristics, such as place of residence and family income.

The big picture

Based on data from large-scale youth surveys, a continuous decrease in plans for further education among young people can be observed. Time-series comparison is made more difficult by the fact that, during the period between 2000 and 2004, only yes/no answer options were given to respondents, with the addition of a refusal-to-answer option. In contrast, betexperiences20, the proportion of young people who do not yet show awareness of this issue, i.e., have not yet thought about whether they wish to continue their current, existing school experiences, can be measured. Considering this, our deeper, two-dimensional studies and comparative, longitudinal analysis focus on the results of four national youth surveys conducted between 2008 and 2020 (*Youth2008, Hungarian Youth 2012, Hungarian Youth Research 2016, Hungarian Youth Research 2020*). In 2000, 47% of 15–29-year-olds intended to continue

studies, dropping to 40% by 2004. Meanwhile, those not planning to continue increased from 44% to 53%. Uncertainty hovered around 9% in 2000 and 7% in 2004.

Since 2008, there has been a clear decrease in commitment to further education plans, while a negative attitude has increased in this area, along with a moderate spread of lack of awareness (Figure 1; Figure 2). While in 2008, 51 percent of 15–29-year-olds reported plans to continue their education, this proportion had decreased to 27 percent by 2020. The proportion of young people who did not plan to continue their education increased from 27% to 50% during this period.

(“Would you like to continue your education, take a course, learn something else?”; percentage distribution; own compilation; $N_{2008} = 7996$, $N_{2012} = 7733$, $N_{2016} = 7991$, $N_{2020} = 7986$)

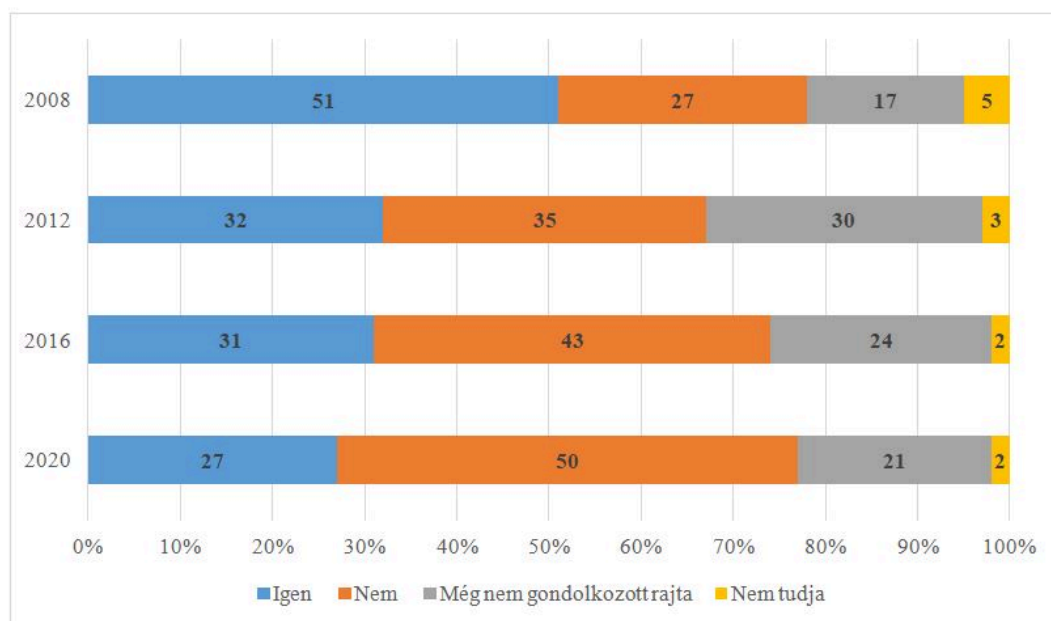
Figure 1 — Evolution of intention to continue education between 2008 and 2020

	2008	2012	2016	2020
Yes	51	32	31	27
Not	27	35	43	50
Haven't thought about it yet.	17	30	24	21
He doesn't know.	5	3	2	2

Source: Youth2008, Hungarian Youth 2012, Hungarian Youth Research 2016, Hungarian Youth Research 2020

(“Would you like to continue your education, take a course, learn something else?”; percentage distribution; own editing; $N_{2008} = 7996$, $N_{2012} = 7733$, $N_{2016} = 7991$, $N_{2020} = 7986$)

Figure 2 — Development of intention to continue education between 2008 and 2020



Source: Youth2008, Hungarian Youth 2012, Hungarian Youth Research 2016, Hungarian Youth Research 2020

If we look at the distribution between age groups during the same period, we can see that the proportion of young people planning to continue their education decreases with age (Figure 3; Figure

4). In particular, we see a significant difference between 15–19-year-olds and older people, with young people planning to continue their studies being overrepresented among the former. This represents a difference of 22 percentage points in 2008, 21 in 2012, 29 in 2016, and 26 in 2020 when comparing young people under 20 years of age with those aged 20–24. There is no marked difference between the attitudes of 20–24-year-olds and 25–29-year-olds. Based on this, it can be assumed that obtaining a high school degree or first professional qualification – which can be achieved between the ages of 18 and 20 – is a watershed moment, leading many young people to lose their desire to continue their education.

(“Would you like to continue your education, take a course, learn something else?” – proportions of those who answered “yes”; percentage distribution; own compilation; $N_{2008} = 7996$, $N_{2012} = 7733$, $N_{2016} = 7991$, $N_{2020} = 7986$; $p \leq 0.001$)

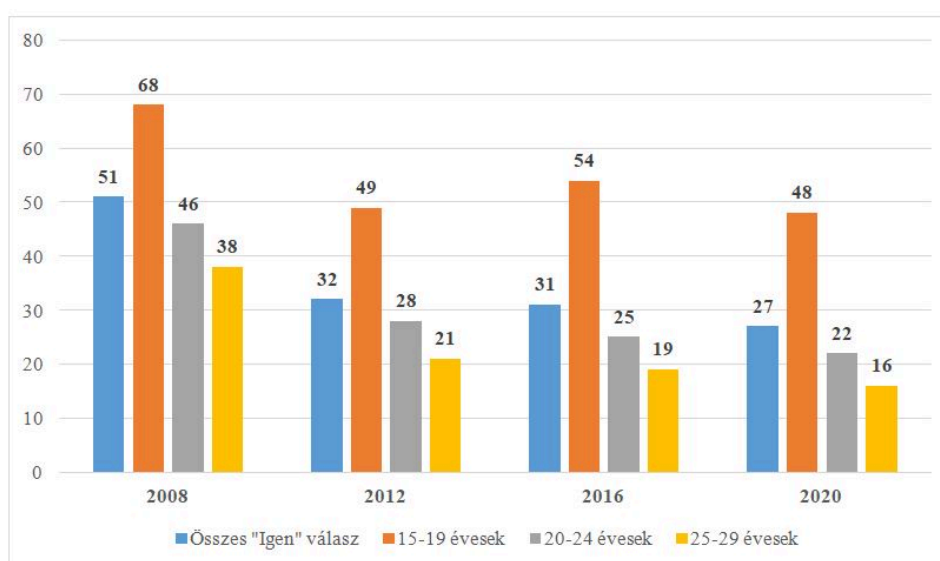
Figure 3 — Development of those intending to continue their education by age group between 2008 and 2020

	2008	2012	2016	2020
Total "Yes" answers	51	32	31	27
15-19 years old	68	49	54	48
20-24 years old	46	28	25	22
25-29 years old	38	21	19	16

Source: Youth2008, Hungarian Youth 2012, Hungarian Youth Research 2016, Hungarian Youth Research 2020

(“Would you like to continue your education, take a course, learn something else?” – proportions of those who answered “yes”; percentage distribution; own compilation; $N_{2008} = 7996$, $N_{2012} = 7733$, $N_{2016} = 7991$, $N_{2020} = 7986$; $p \leq 0.001$)

Figure 4 — Development of those intending to continue their education by age group between 2008 and 2020

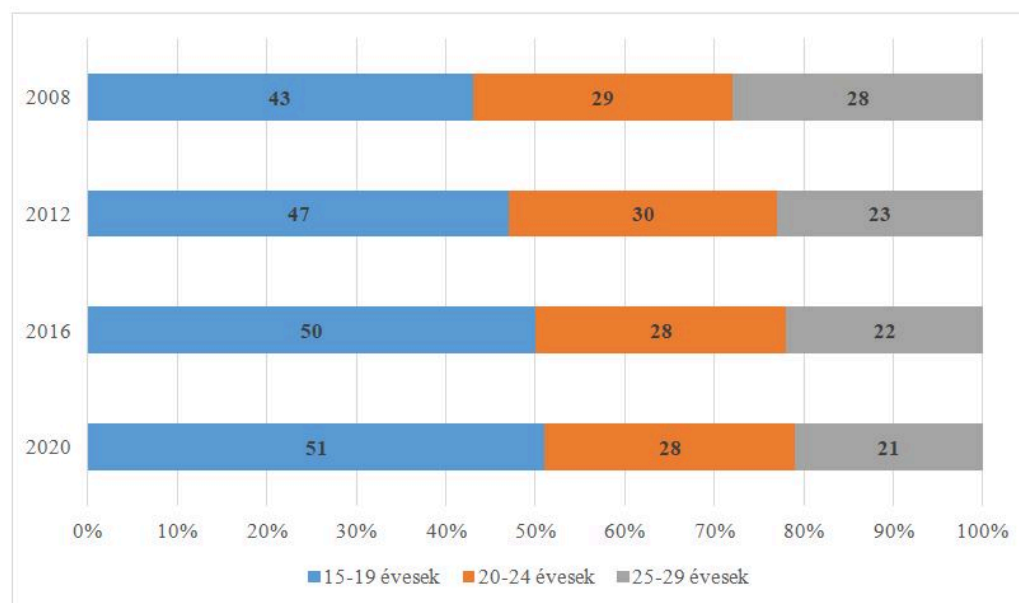


Source: Youth2008, Hungarian Youth 2012, Hungarian Youth Research 2016, Hungarian Youth Research 2020

Regarding the age composition of those planning to continue their education, the proportion of 15–19-year-olds has been steadily increasing from 2008 to 2020 (Figure 5). In contrast, we observe a declining trend in the proportion of 25–29-year-olds. According to this, the commitment of younger people is clearly more pronounced, while with advancing age, ambitions related to further education decrease, especially over the age of 25.

(“Would you like to continue your education, take a course, learn something else?” – those who answered “yes”; percentage distribution; own editing; N 2008 = 7996, N 2012 = 7733, N 2016 = 7991, N 2020 = 7986; $p \leq 0.001$)

Figure 5 — Age distribution among those intending to continue their education between 2008 and 2020



Source: Youth2008, Hungarian Youth 2012, Hungarian Youth Research 2016, Hungarian Youth Research 2020

The background

In the case of plans related to further education, it is worth noting the decisive role of socio-demographic background, as the determination of knowledge capital and social reproduction also comes into focus (Figure 6). The effect of educational attainment is significant: those most committed to further education are found among young people with up to eight primary school grades, while those with a vocational qualification are least committed. This is especially true for the period 2012–2020, when the two educational attainment levels create significant differences in young people's motivations for further education. *For example, in 2020, a young person with eight primary school grades is almost five times more likely to plan to continue their studies than a young person with a vocational qualification.* A change is also evident in higher educational attainment compared to the period under review. In 2008, a stronger intention to continue education was typical across the entire age group (51%), but higher rates were also observed among those with a high school degree (47%) and a degree (52%). In contrast, a significant decrease is observed from 2012 (32%), and the commitment to further education among young people with a high school degree (27%) and a degree (32%) is decreasing.

The role of settlement size is also significant, and its impact on the intention to continue studying can be measured. In this area, the most significant commitment is found among young people living in large rural cities: those planning to continue their studies are consistently overrepresented. At the same time, the intention to continue studying among those living in small rural towns and villages develops

similarly to the proportions measurable in the entire sample. However, in the case of Budapest, we can clearly see a lower potential for further study. It is worth highlighting the 2020 data, which show that young people planning to continue studying are underrepresented not only in Budapest but also in villages.

(“Would you like to continue your education, take a course, learn something else?” – proportions of those answering “yes”; percentage distribution; own compilation; $N_{2008} = 7589-7996$, $N_{2012} = 7022-7733$, $N_{2016} = 7396-7991$, $N_{2020} = 7696-7986$; $p \leq 0.001$)

Figure 6 — Sociodemographic background of those intending to continue their education between 2008 and 2020

Total	Total	51	32	31	27
Highest completed educational qualification	Up to 8 primary school classes	62	46	48	47
Highest completed educational qualification	Vocational training, vocational school	35	18	12	10
Highest completed educational qualification	Matriculation	47	27	26	21
Highest completed educational qualification	Degree	52	32	32	26
Settlement type	Budapest	41	20	24	24
Settlement type	County seat, city with county rights	58	40	35	33
Settlement type	Another city	52	32	30	29
Settlement type	Municipality	49	33	33	23
Mother/Guardian's highest completed educational qualification	Up to 8 primary school classes	42	27	18	22
Mother/Guardian's highest completed educational qualification	Vocational training, vocational school	48	30	26	21
Mother/Guardian's highest completed educational qualification	Matriculation	53	35	36	30
Mother/Guardian's highest completed educational qualification	Degree	64	47	44	38
Father/Foster father's highest completed educational qualification	Up to 8 primary school classes	41	24	16	19
Father/Foster father's highest completed educational qualification	Vocational training, vocational school	48	33	29	24
Father/Foster father's highest completed educational qualification	Matriculation	55	35	35	30
Father/Foster father's highest completed educational qualification	Degree	61	46	41	37
Subjective status “Overall, how do you feel financially...”	They live without worries	57	33	42	40
Subjective status “Overall, how do you feel financially...”	They get along well with their job.	53	35	35	27
Subjective status “Overall, how do you feel financially...”	They are just getting by on their income.	49	32	26	23
Subjective status “Overall, how do you feel financially...”	They have financial problems from month to month.	44	33	21	25
Subjective status “Overall, how do you feel financially...”	They live amidst deprivation	38	22	16	24

Source: Youth2008, Hungarian Youth 2012, Hungarian Youth Research 2016, Hungarian Youth 2020

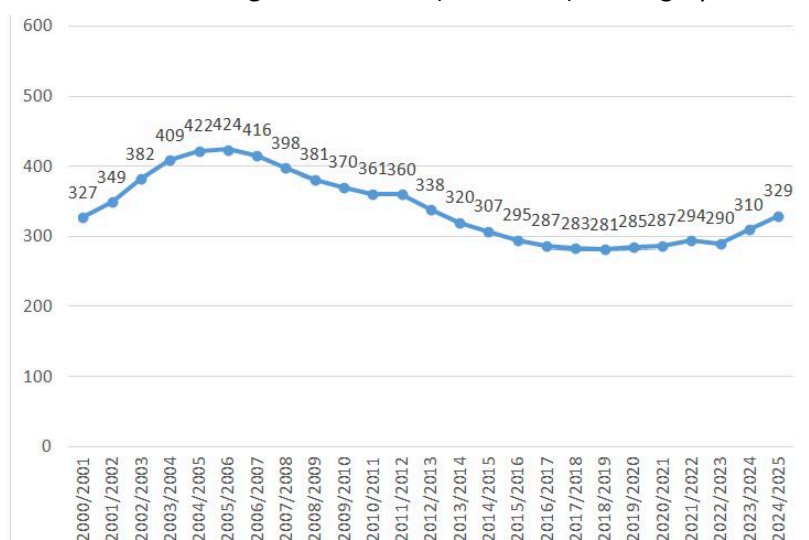
The effect of parents' educational level can also be measured significantly, and in this respect, the intention to continue education is directly proportional to the increase in educational level. The lower the education level of the mother or father, the less likely a young person is to plan to continue their studies. According to this, planning to continue their studies is most typical among children of graduate parents, while it is least typical among children of parents with no more than an eight-year primary school education. Among the former, the likelihood of planning to continue their education is 1.5 to 2 times higher than among children of parents with low levels of education.

In relation to the financial situation, we examined the effect of subjective status, thereby broadening the exploration of the significance of sociodemographic and sociocultural background. The influence of status perception can also be measured: experiencing a stable financial situation is more likely to lead to plans for further education than experiencing regular financial problems and deprivation. Among young people with a carefree financial background, the likelihood of having plans to continue their studies is 1.5 to 2 times greater than among those living in difficult financial circumstances. This is especially true of the results of the 2016 survey, where the proportion of young people planning to continue their studies was 42 percent among young people living without problems, while 16 percent among those living in deprivation. By 2020, this gap had narrowed somewhat: the proportion of those who continued their studies was 40 percent among those living without problems, while 24 percent among those living in deprivation. However, it is also important to note that in 2020, similar rates were observed across all other social groups, except those with a carefree financial background. All this presumably highlights that the perception of a more or less uncertain status beyond a stable financial situation significantly limits future plans.

Other data sources

It is important to highlight that in further education, it is also worth distinguishing between attitude and action (cf. Spéder-Kapitány, 2007). After all, when it comes to future plans, measurable preferences, formulated opinions, and actual, implemented plans that have been translated into action are not the same. The characteristics of the socio-demographic and socio-cultural environment of young people influence the nature of school experiences and educational attainment just as much as the structure of the labour market, or the consequences of the economic, social, and political systems and their institutional structures. All these shape the stages and decisions of the life path, affecting further education to varying degrees.

Figure 7 — Number of students in higher education (thousands) in Hungary between 2000 and 2025

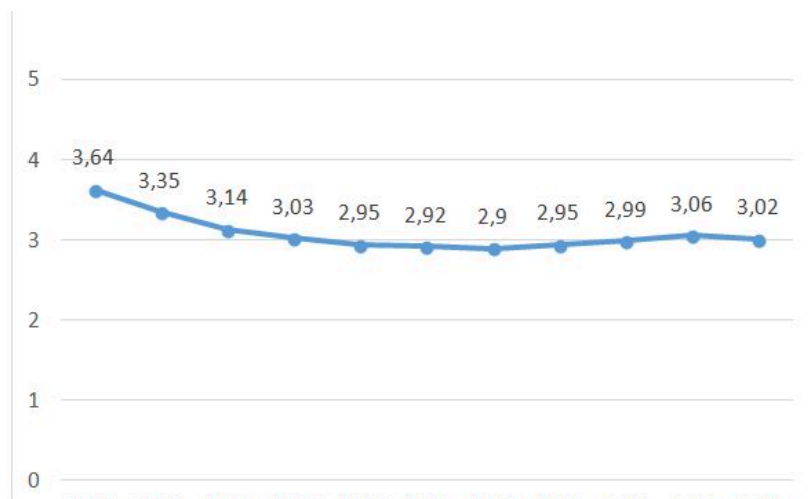


Source: Central Statistical Office - STADAT

In this case, however, the statistics on further education (Central Statistical Office data tables) clearly parallel the trends observed in youth research. Over the period since the turn of the millennium, a clear decrease in the number of students in higher education can be observed (Figure 7). This is especially true from the 2005-2006 academic year, when this value was the highest, 424 thousand people. After that, a steady decrease persisted until the 2018-2019 academic year, after which a slow but steady increase began. Since 2023, two major jumps have been observed. However, it is important to note that the number of people joining higher education has been artificially inflated by government measures (e.g., the abolition of the language exam requirement).

The ratio of students to the total population also clearly illustrates the decline in the potential for further education (Figure 8). Between 2013 and 2019, a continuous decrease was observed in the ratio of higher education students to the total population. While a moderate increase becomes noticeable from 2020, which is not leveled out, another decrease becomes visible by 2023.

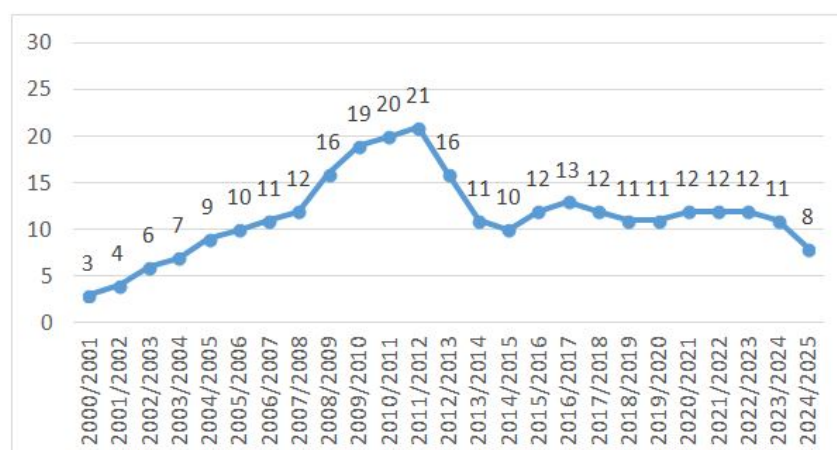
Figure 8 — Proportion of students within the total population in Hungary between 2013 and 2023**
(own compilation)



Source: Central Statistical Office - STADAT

We can also see a decrease in the number of participants in higher education vocational training (Figure 9). The 2011-2012 academic year was the peak in this area, after which a significant decrease began, followed by an increase in the 2016-2017 academic year. However, since then, the number of students in higher education vocational training has been around 11-12 thousand. In the 2024-2025 academic year, another decline was observed, with the number of students in higher education vocational training being just over 8 thousand.

Figure 9 — Number of students in higher education vocational training (thousands) in Hungary between 2000 and 2025



Source: Central Statistical Office - STADAT

Summary

Based on the data examined, it can be concluded that a typical trend among young people in Hungary is a decrease in the desire to continue their education and a decrease in ambitions related to continuing their studies. This is especially true for young people pursuing a profession or obtaining a high school degree, where the restraint of such plans is clearly evident compared to their younger peers with a maximum of 8 years of primary education. If we examine the impact of sociodemographic-sociocultural factors, the effects of different statuses are readily measurable: settlement size, parents' educational level, and subjective financial situation. The effect of social reproduction is particularly thought-provoking: among highly educated parents, the likelihood that their children will continue their education is much higher than among parents with lower qualifications. Just as the attitude toward financial opportunities significantly influences further education, especially among young people in carefree status, the motivation to continue education is stronger, while a lower status makes it more likely that such plans will be abandoned.

Resources

- Youth 2008 large-sample youth research questionnaire and database,
- Hungarian Youth 2012 large-sample youth research questionnaire and database,
- Hungarian Youth Research 2016 large-sample youth survey questionnaire and database,
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