Welcome

The first issue of the 13th volume of **Opus et Educatio**, now the 48th in a row, is still closely linked to education and, within it, to teacher training, as a university periodical that addresses the interaction of work and education from a multidisciplinary perspective. Although the required interaction between education and research can be effectively implemented under these conditions, one of the peculiarities of our journal is that its issues are now published alternately in English and Hungarian. In fact, all this raises a delicate dilemma from the point of view of scientific communication or pedagogical culture: international referencing classifications rightly consider the measurability, number, and distribution of authors, reviewers, and especially references to be essential criteria. Well, given all this, with the alternating issues in English and Hungarian, we would like to provide domestic authors, especially those participating in doctoral training and lacking experience in scientific publishing, with modern professional publication opportunities and methodological support.

For the second year in a row, we have been striving to publish a current topic that is at the forefront of professional interest in our **Online First** column in an accelerated manner. The first article in this issue is related to the opening article of our ongoing discussion series, Kristóf Nyíri's "Renewed higher education, renewed science?" (12th Vol. 4 (2025): 47th issue / Online First). The article by Ádám Nagy and Anna Fazekas: Open books, closed doors? - changes in learning intentions based on large-scale youth research data aims to analyze whether the “open educational scissors” can also be interpreted in the case of learning intentions, i.e. whether the assumption is valid that while the intention to continue studying among those with higher education or university degrees is almost a natural need (status preservation), aversion to the school system is common among young people with lower backgrounds. Although the authors' study is basically about the changes in the reading habits of Hungarian youth, international professional attention may also be rightly interested in the effect of social reproduction: in the case of graduated parents, the chances of young people having plans to continue their education are much higher than in the case of parents with lower qualifications. Furthermore, attitudes toward financial opportunities also significantly influence further education, especially among young people who enjoy a carefree status; the motivation to continue their education is stronger, whereas a lower status makes it more likely that such plans will be abandoned. Three articles in our traditional Studies column deal with particularly current topics. illustrating the innovative effects of the online world in multidisciplinary areas. Nikoletta Tolnar and Monika Pogatsnik: Reconceptualising the Notion of Online Exam Cheating Based on the Results of a Questionnaire Survey, Valeria Nagy: Interpretation of work-place well-being in higher education along the analogy of collective synchronisation, and Károly Herényi and Zsuzsa Mátrai: The role of transferable skills in the educational mismatch of employed graduates are noteworthy research reports. In this issue, we have undertaken both qualitative and quantitative innovations. All of this is based on the recognition that the number of case studies in research has increased gratifyingly. In this genre, it is sometimes more difficult to obtain publication opportunities, but at the same time, these descriptive evaluative articles can enrich the empirical body of research and can provide significant impulses to researchers already active in the given field, on the one hand, and on the other hand, they present insights and experiments related to practice in higher education, which can make learning more realistic and interesting.

Based on this insight, we launched a new section, **Case Studies**, which published two studies. As part of an international project, four authors - Borbély-Pecze, Tiboe, Bors¸Hloušková, Lenka; Šprlák, Tomáš; Crăciun, Marian - completed the study Career Guidance in the Central and South-Eastern European Region: The case of four countries via the lenses of non-governmental organisations. The other case study - Katalin Gyöngyösi, Gyula Balogh, and Péter Lukács – its title is also telling: “Boldly and without taboos” - A case study of the First-Hand Information on Homelessness awareness-raising programme.

Following the case studies, the Editorial Board wants to provide more space for articles describing research, new publications, and books to expand opportunities for scientific communication. Therefore, our **Review** section also publishes reviews of three interesting and noteworthy works. Thanks to the reviewers – Claudia Stöckl, Balázs Németh, and Sári Krisztina Nagy.

Dear Reader,

We have entered the spring of 2026. This welcome, like the previous one, is less detailed due to the changes and colorful content; the gratifyingly increasing number of articles together offer the reader and analyst the opportunity to learn about the details of a topic or column. All this shows that Opus et Educatio has become more dynamic, the authors' interest has increased gratifyingly, and our periodical is developing in sync with this.

Budapest, March 2026

András Benedek

Editor-in-Chief

Ádám NAGY & Anna FAZEKAS

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)

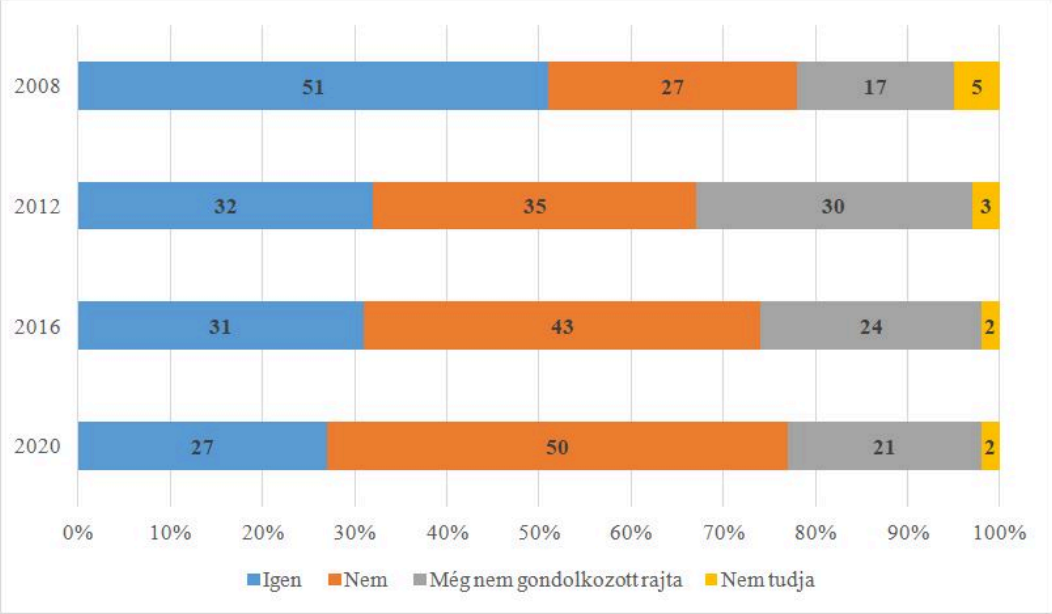
Figure 1 — Evolution of intention to continue education between 2008 and 2020

	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 ≤0.001)

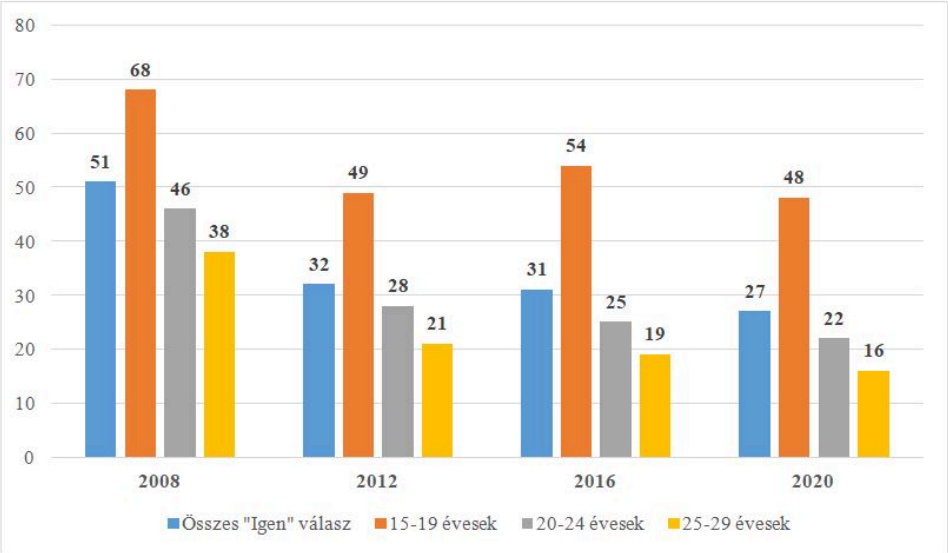
Figure 3 — Development of those intending to continue their education by age group between 2008 and 2020

	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 ≤0.001)

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

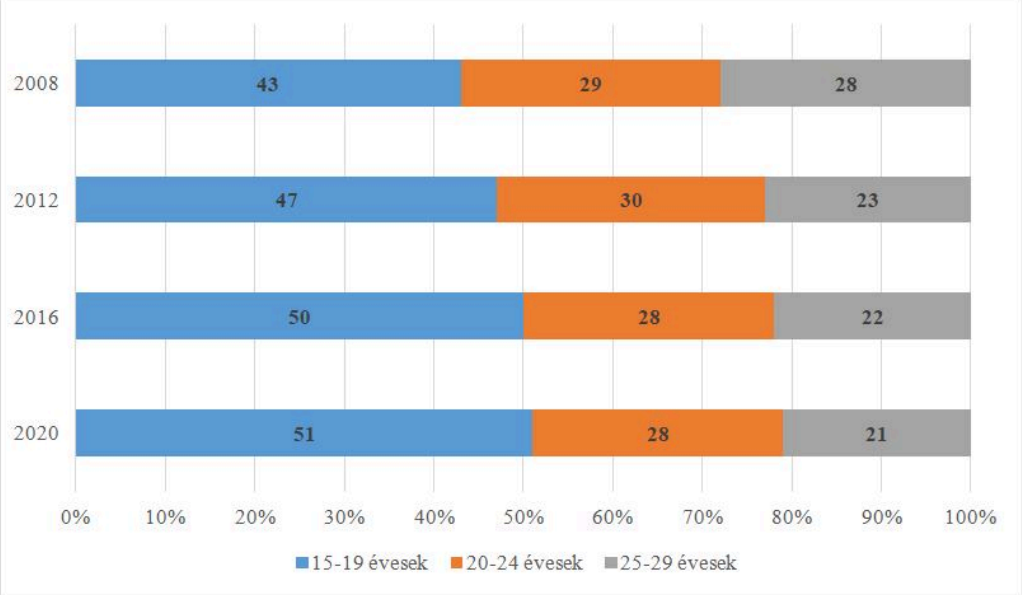


Source: Youth2008, Hungarian Youth 2012, Hungarian Youth Research 2016, Hungarian Youth Research 2020

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 ≤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 ≤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

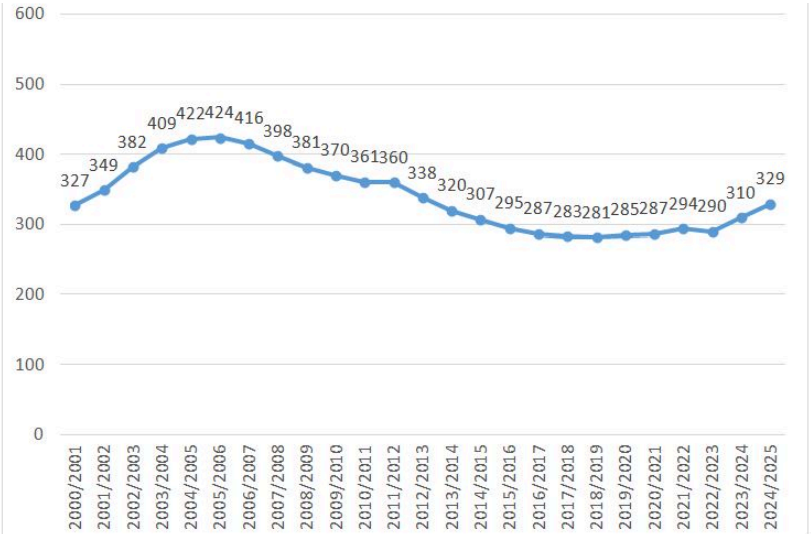
The effect of parents' educational level can also be measured significantly, and in this respect, the intention to continue education is directly proportional to the increase in educational level. The lower the education level of the mother or father, the less likely a young person is to plan to continue 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

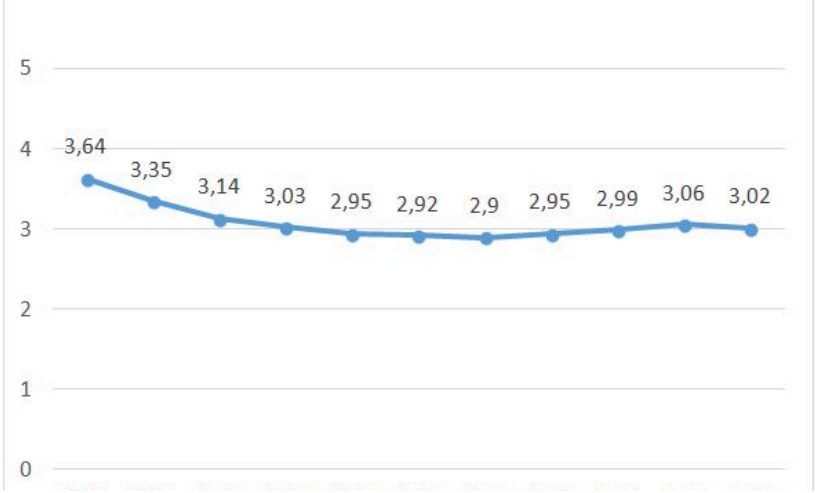


Source: Central Statistical Office - STADAT

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.

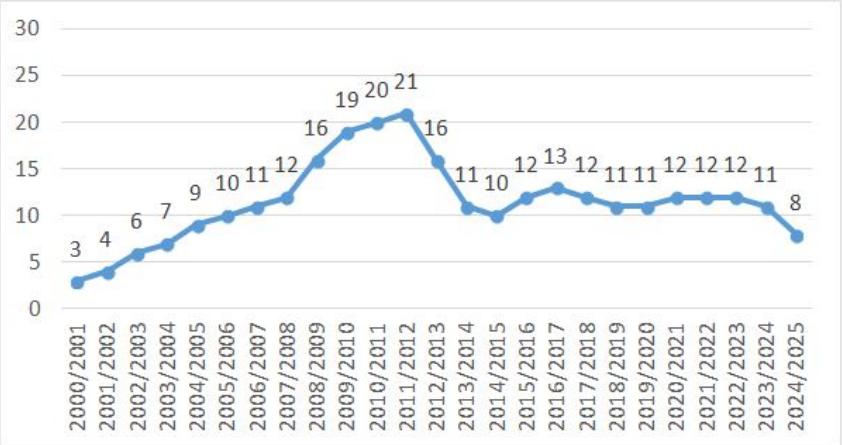
Figure 8 — Proportion of students within the total population in Hungary between 2013 and 2023** (own compilation)



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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Nikoletta TOLNER & Monika POGÁTSNIK

Students' Perceptions of Online Exam Cheating and AI Use

Introduction

The rapid advancement of technology, particularly the availability of artificial intelligence (AI) tools, has fundamentally transformed higher education assessment, creating new challenges in academic integrity (Kell et al., 2025; Stanoyevitch, 2024). The International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI, 2025) identifies six fundamental values for maintaining academic integrity: honesty, courage, trust, respect, responsibility, and fairness. These principles serve as guiding standards across all areas of learning, teaching, and research, forming the foundation of many institutional codes of ethics. The spread of online education and assessment has not only altered the learning environment but also opened new opportunities for cheating (Zdravkova, 2023), while students' motivations (Maleki, 2025) and attitudes have undergone significant change (Amzalag, Shapira & Dolev, 2022; Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021). Detecting and preventing cheating in online examinations (Corrigan-Gibbs et al., 2015) has become increasingly difficult, especially with the rise of AI-based tools, chatbots, and automated text generators, which introduce a new dimension to the issue of academic honesty. According to the ICAI, it is not AI itself that threatens integrity, but rather its unethical and non-transparent use. Institutions therefore have the responsibility to teach students how to apply AI responsibly, ensure transparency in its use, and address inequalities arising from differences in access (ICAI, 2025). For universities, it is an urgent task to develop strategies that are technologically, pedagogically, and ethically sound to reduce the propensity to cheat and preserve the integrity of examinations, particularly in the online environment (Kell et al., 2025; Rüth, Jansen, & Kaspar, 2024).

The aim of this study is to explore students' attitudes at Obuda University's Alba Regia Faculty toward misconduct in online examinations, with a special focus on the impact of the availability of AI-based tools. The research seeks to determine the extent to which access to AI technologies influences students' propensity to cheat and their moral and practical perceptions of such behavior. To this end, we conducted a questionnaire-based survey and analyzed the responses using statistical methods.

Literature Review

Artificial Intelligence and Its Relation to Online Exams

AI tools, such as ChatGPT, are capable of generating complex texts that can be used in exam situations and essay writing (Oravec, 2023), thereby raising new questions regarding academic integrity (Asogwa, Isiwu & Nwakpadolu, 2022; Cotton, Cotton & Shipway, 2023; Lund et al., 2025). An increasing number of studies are examining methods for detecting AI-based cheating, such as text style analysis and the development of plagiarism-detection algorithms (Fraser, Dawkins & Kiritchenko, 2025). Therefore, universities must be prepared to introduce appropriate regulations and tools to prevent such types of misconduct (Luo, 2024).

The security of online examinations also requires special attention. While online testing offers a convenient and flexible solution, the risk of cheating may increase if appropriate proctoring software or monitoring methods are not applied (Cantiello & Geschke, 2024). Some studies suggest that AI-driven cameras and behavior-analysis algorithms used in online proctoring can significantly reduce the likelihood of cheating, yet they also raise ethical concerns (Coghlan, Miller & Paterson, 2021). Therefore, educators and institutions must develop strategies that minimize opportunities for cheating while respecting students' privacy and comfort (Mutimukwe et al., 2025).

The use of artificial intelligence in higher education cannot be excluded, as both students and faculty increasingly rely on these tools. The challenge lies not in banning AI altogether, but in integrating it in an ethical, transparent, and responsible manner (Oravec, 2023). Some research calls for adapting assessment practices by introducing strategies that support authentic learning, safeguard integrity, and

provide direction for future educational policy and pedagogical reforms (Garcia et al., 2025). Education must aim to teach students how to properly document and reference the possibilities offered by AI, as mastering these skills contributes to preserving academic integrity and preparing for a professional environment increasingly interwoven with AI.

Research on Students' Cheating Attitudes

Understanding students' propensities and motivations for cheating is crucial to ensuring the security of online examinations. Research indicates that the main factors behind cheating include performance pressure, time constraints, and a lack of trust in online proctoring systems (Waltzer & Dahl, 2022). In addition, social norms can influence cheating behavior; when students observe their peers cheating regularly, they are more likely to engage in this behavior (Malesky et al., 2021). Another important factor is the perception of AI tools: while some students regard them as learning aids, others use them to cheat (Lund et al., 2025).

A useful starting point for interpreting students' attitudes toward cheating is the theory of behavioral economist Dan Ariely (2012), which suggests that most people are not entirely honest or dishonest, but rather seek a compromise that allows them to benefit from cheating while maintaining a positive moral self-image (Ariely, 2012). According to Ariely (2012), people generally cheat only a little, as long as they can justify it to themselves. This so-called "fudge factor" means that decision-making is not merely a matter of weighing risks (getting caught vs. gaining), but involves an interplay between identity and self-justification. Another important finding in Ariely's work is that the example set by the social environment (for instance, if multiple people in a group cheat) significantly increases the likelihood of cheating.

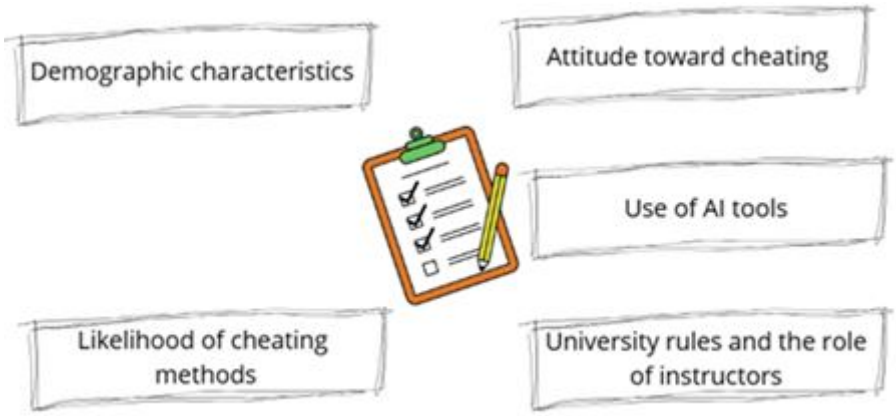
Further nuance for understanding students' attitudes toward cheating is provided by the research of Gino and Ariely (2012), which suggests that creative thinking can serve not only innovation but also self-justification. Their findings indicate that individuals with higher creativity are more likely to find acceptable explanations for rule-breaking, thereby maintaining a positive moral self-image. This means that cheating does not necessarily stem from a lack of moral standards, but from the cognitive ability to "reframe" one's own actions as morally acceptable.

Thus, Ariely's work provides an important theoretical framework for a deeper understanding of student behavior observed during online exams. The blurring of boundaries between permissible and prohibited conduct, especially with the advent of digital tools and AI, presents new challenges for maintaining academic integrity.

Presentation of Own Research

What significant differences and distinct resilience profiles can be identified between Generation Z and Generation Alpha, considering the influence of gender and the moderating effects of relevant demographic variables? Among quantitative research methods, this study employed a questionnaire survey to examine factors influencing the propensity to cheat, perceptions of the use of AI tools in online exams, and the relationships between demographic characteristics and attitudes toward cheating. The questionnaire was completed by students from the fields of engineering, economics, and geodesy at our university. The survey was conducted online (via Google Forms) during the second semester of the 2024/25 academic year, with the assistance of teaching staff who also provided a brief introduction to the students. A total of 189 valid responses were collected. The topic was analyzed from multiple perspectives (Figure 1).

Figure 1 — Topics Examined in the Questionnaire



Source: Author's own compilation

- Demographic data: e.g., age, gender, type of residence, level of study, and major. This helps to understand how students' backgrounds may influence their propensity to cheat.
- Attitudes toward cheating: assessment of statements that map students' beliefs about cheating (e.g., "It is easier to cheat in online exams than in traditional exams").
- Likelihood of cheating methods: examined the probability of various forms of cheating (e.g., use of secondary devices, internet searches, assistance from friends).
- University rules and instructor role: questions also addressed how well students know and consider university rules to be fair, and whether clearer expectations from instructors or emphasizing the relevance of the course could reduce cheating tendencies.
- Use of AI tools: the questionnaire specifically investigated how acceptable students consider the use of AI tools and how frequently they believe other students use them.

Below, the demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented (Figure 2).

Figure 2 — Demographic Characteristics (*N=189)

Demographic Variable	Category	Count (N)
Gender	female	42 (22.2%)
	male	147 (77.8%)
Mode of study	full-time	129 (68.3%)
	correspondence	60 (31.7%)
Level of study	undergraduate	146 (77.2%)
	higher education vocational training	39 (20.6%)
	master's	4 (2.2%)
Field of study	geodesy	68 (35.9%)
	engineering	61 (32.3%)
	IT	56 (29.6%)
	economics	4 (2.2%).
Scholarship	yes	54 (28.6%)
	no	135 (71.4%)
Type of residence	city	68 (35.9%)
	county seat	46 (24.3%)
	village	35 (18.5%)
	township	25 (13.2%)
	capital city	14 (7.4%)
	other	1 (0.5%)
Parents' education level	secondary school	99 (52.4%)
	college degree	47 (24.9%)
	university degree or higher	33 (17.4%)
	primary school	9 (4.8%)
	no formal education	1 (0.5%)

Source: Author's own compilation

The respondents had an average age of 24.1 years (ranging from 18 to 50), with 78.3% falling between 18 and 24 years old and 15.9% being over 30. Among the demographic variables, young (18–24 years old) full-time male students are significantly overrepresented in the sample, accurately reflecting the gender distribution of students in our faculty. Although our findings provide useful insights into students' perceptions of online exam cheating and the use of AI tools, they should be interpreted with caution. We conducted the survey among students from a single faculty, and participation was voluntary, so our sample is not representative of the wider university population at either the national or international level. We interpret our results primarily as exploratory findings reflecting the characteristics and attitudes of this specific student group. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples across multiple institutions to examine whether the patterns identified in this study are observable in broader higher education contexts.

Response distributions by question

Exam mode preference: The majority of respondents (111 students, 58.7%) prefer online exams, while 78 students (41.3%) prefer in-person exams.

Participation in online exams: 104 students (55.0%) participated in online exams 1–5 times, 54 students (28.6%) never participated, 19 students (10.1%) participated 6–10 times, and 12 students (6.3%) participated more than 10 times.

Perceived security of protection: In response to the question, "How secure do you feel the protection against cheating is during online exams compared to traditional exams?" (1 = "Much less secure," 5 = "Much more secure"), 41.8% of respondents gave a score of 3, 35.4% scored 1–2, and 22.7% scored 4–5. Thus, most respondents rated the security of online protection as moderate or weak.

Discomfort caused by security measures: The majority of respondents (75.1%) reported experiencing discomfort due to proctoring measures ("Yes, sometimes" 29.6%, "Yes, often" 24.3%, "Rarely" 21.2%), while 24.9% never experienced such discomfort.

Likelihood of attempting to cheat (undetected): In response to the question of how likely they would be to attempt cheating if it remained completely unnoticed (1 = "very unlikely," 5 = "very likely"), 34.9% of respondents gave a score of 3, 40.8% scored 4–5 (19.6% scored 4; 21.2% scored 5), and 24.3% scored 1–2.

Providing and receiving help: 56.6% of respondents (107 students) reported that they had helped someone achieve a better result in an online exam, while 43.4% (82 students) had not. Similarly, 54% (102 students) had received help from others, while 46% (87 students) had not.

Failing an online exam: 137 students (72.5%) had never failed an online exam, 50 students (26.5%) had failed a few times, and 2 students (1.0%) had failed multiple times.

Online vs. traditional exams: 68% of respondents believed that it is easier to cheat in an online exam compared to a traditional one.

For the *Likert-scale statements*, respondents mostly selected values close to neutral or above. Notably, 64% (scoring 4–5) agreed with the statement "In the hope of receiving a higher scholarship, many students do not shy away from cheating." Similarly, 72% considered the statement "Out of fear of failing, several students have already resorted to cheating during exams" to be likely (4–5 points). In contrast, agreement was less pronounced with statements such as "Cheating is justifiable if the exam format or content is too difficult" (32% gave 4–5 points) and "If others cheat, it puts me at a disadvantage" (33% gave 4–5 points). A majority of respondents (58%) believe that most instructors strictly punish cheating. Furthermore, 57% of students indicated that lack of time is one of the reasons for cheating, while 58% stated that the instructor's personality influences their willingness to cheat. With respect to the statement "Cheating is motivated by the need to meet parental or external expectations," the respondents were nearly evenly divided, with 66 agreeing and 61 disagreeing.

Forms of cheating: For the statements referring to specific forms of cheating (use of unauthorized notes, asking for help, internet searches, use of messaging applications, secondary devices), the most frequently indicated as likely were asking friends or classmates for help (43.4% scored 4–5) and searching for answers on the internet (44.0%). The use of unauthorized notes was considered likely by 41.3% of respondents. Other methods (messaging, secondary devices) were also reported with considerable likelihood (34–40%). Overall, respondents generally considered multiple methods of cheating to be possible.

AI tools in online exams: A majority of respondents (60%) agreed (4–5 points) with the statement "Using AI tools constitutes cheating," while 16% disagreed. Regarding the likelihood that "other students use AI tools," 62% of respondents agreed (4–5 points). Concerning the statement "I consider the use of AI tools acceptable," 34% disagreed (1–2 points), while only 40% regarded it as acceptable (4–5 points). This ambivalence illustrates well the mechanism of "self-justified cheating" described by Ariely and Gino (2012), which suggests that cheating is often not the result of a fully conscious and explicit decision but rather a rationalized behavior shaped by situational context and internal narratives. It was also observed that among students who considered the use of AI tools acceptable (40%), 78.6% (56 individuals) did not strictly regard it as cheating, but rather as a form of learning support. This supports the notion that the further a practice is perceived to be from traditional cheating practices (e.g., crib notes), the easier it becomes to justify it morally. Based on the findings, the online environment, the relatively looser monitoring, and the ambiguous status of AI tools collectively contribute to students perceiving cheating more as a rationalized behavior than as a consciously unethical act. When asked whether universities should more strictly monitor the use of AI in online exams, only 28% agreed, while 39% disagreed. Furthermore, we examined the relationship between AI use and the propensity to cheat. The results

showed a strong association: the use of AI tools was closely related to cheating propensity ($\chi^2 = 63.30$, df = 16, $p = 1.44\times10^{-7}$), indicating that students who are more inclined to cheat are also more likely to use AI tools.

Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Responses

At the end of the questionnaire, two open-ended questions were included. One asked students about the reasons for cheating, and the other about possible ways to reduce it. We first analyzed the responses related to the causes of cheating using thematic coding. The most frequently occurring words in the texts referring to the reasons for cheating are illustrated in the word cloud in Figure 3.

Figure 3 — Most Frequently Occurring Expressions in the Text Discussing the Causes of Cheating

Source: Author's own compilation

The responses were first labeled with short, descriptive tags (“codes”), which were then grouped into broader themes (Figure 4). The aim of the analysis was to explore the factors underlying online exam cheating and to understand how students rationalize their own behavior.

Figure 4 — Factors Influencing Online Exam Cheating

Main Category	Subcategory (Code)	Frequency (n)	Example
Motivational Factor	Lack of time / Overload	18	"Many students suffer from lack of time due to a dense schedule and staying late at university."
	Fear of failing	14	"Fear of failing, expectations, stress, lack of time."
	Desire for better grades / success	11	"Wants to achieve a better grade."
	Pressure to meet expectations (parents, teachers, scholarship)	8	"Primarily the pressure to meet expectations from ourselves, our teachers, and our parents"; "To retain a scholarship or move to a higher category."
	Lack of motivation / disinterest	6	"The student is too lazy to learn the material, or simply is not interested."
Environmental Factors	Lower risk of being caught	12	"Because the chance of being caught is lower."
	Sense of security in online format	9	"Because the online environment makes cheating easier."
	Easier access / more opportunities	8	"Simpler and more ways to cheat."
	Lack of instructor control	6	"There is no teacher around to monitor; it feels safer at home than in the classroom."
	Generational effect / peer influence	4	"Because there are more opportunities and the current generation takes advantage of them."; "Others are doing it, so why not?"
Pedagogical Factors	Irrelevance of course content	24	"Many courses are not actually needed for professional practice."
	Unrealistic / unclear requirements	19	"Mostly because of unrealistic expectations and unclear requirements."
	Instructor attitude	20	"If the teacher delivers the class clearly and understandably, the likelihood of cheating decreases."

Source: Author's own compilation

Based on the content analysis of student responses, several interrelated factors can be identified behind online exam cheating. The qualitative data indicate that cheating is not solely the result of individual decisions but also the outcome of organizational, pedagogical, and environmental influences.

Motivational factors show that students decide to cheat under the influence of internal pressures and constraints. The most common reason is lack of time and overload: many prepare for several exams at once while also dealing with other obligations (e.g., work, family). In addition, fear of failure and the need to meet expectations are strongly present, further intensified by the desire to maintain a scholarship or meet family expectations. These factors suggest that for students, cheating is often not an end in itself but rather a forced means of survival and meeting performance requirements.

Environmental factors mainly stem from the specific characteristics of online exams. Students feel that the risk of getting caught is lower in the online environment, as direct supervision and control are missing. The technical features of the online format, such as the simultaneous availability of multiple digital devices, also facilitate opportunities for cheating. In addition, the sense of a safer environment and the normalization of cheating within the community (others doing the same) further increase the

willingness to cheat. These factors indicate that cheating is not solely an individual decision but also a consequence of the structural weaknesses of the given exam environment.

Pedagogical factors refer to the educational circumstances that contribute to students' willingness to cheat. One of the most frequently mentioned reasons is the perceived irrelevance or uselessness of the curriculum. Students often do not see the practical value of certain subjects, which reduces their motivation to prepare honestly. Closely related to this is the perception of unrealistic expectations, when requirements seem disproportionately difficult or excessively high compared to the time available for preparation. Another significant factor is the attitude of instructors. Several students reported that they do not receive enough explanations, support, or practical examples. This creates uncertainty, making cheating a kind of substitute tool. Unclear requirements and insufficient communication further exacerbate the problem, as students often do not know exactly what is expected of them in exams. Pedagogical factors highlight that cheating is often not merely an individual moral decision but a symptom of deficiencies in the educational environment. Transparent requirements, relevant curriculum, and a supportive teaching attitude could reduce the willingness to cheat.

The analysis clearly shows that students' willingness to cheat is influenced not only by individual decisions but also by the learning environment, teaching methods, and system-level factors. Therefore, measures aimed at reducing cheating require a comprehensive approach. In addition to technical control of the exam environment, increasing the relevance of the curriculum, improving instructors' pedagogical approaches, and strengthening ethical education are all important tasks.

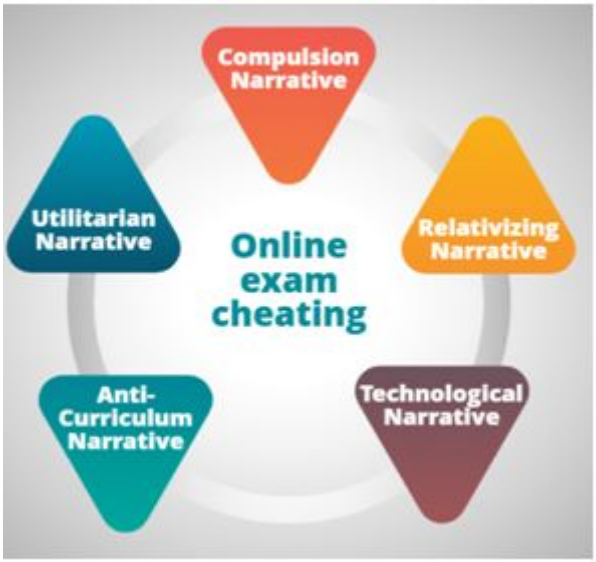
The following recommendations may help to create a more comprehensive, secure, and student-friendly examination environment:

- *Thoughtful scheduling and flexibility of exam periods*: providing multiple trial and retake opportunities so that students do not perceive failure as an irreversible risk.
- *Psychological and learning-management support*: integrating training, workshops, and stress-management techniques into the educational program.
- *Security solutions*: secure exam browsers, randomization of tasks, screen sharing, and camera use, which reinforce the seriousness of the examination situation.
- *Honor code:* emphasizing students' ethical responsibility and strengthening community norms.
- *Relevant and application-oriented curriculum:* prioritizing learning content and exam tasks directly related to future professional activities.
- *Clear exam requirements*: communicating transparent and straightforward criteria to reduce misunderstandings and unrealistic expectations.
- *Varied forms of assessment:* introducing project assignments, oral exams, or small-group solutions where simple copying is less applicable.
- *Instructor attitude and role modeling*: delivering material in an understandable and engaging way and emphasizing ethical behavior to increase student commitment.

Narratives and Self-Justifications Behind Online Exam Cheating

Students justify cheating not only with rational arguments but also with internal narratives that help them maintain a positive moral self-image. These narratives often serve as self-justifications, allowing students to perceive their actions as morally acceptable while minimizing feelings of guilt. According to Ariely's "fudge factor" theory, people tend to rationalize rule-breaking in ways that preserve their moral values and self-concept, which aligns well with the narratives surrounding online exam cheating. It is important to emphasize that these narratives are not necessarily conscious but emerge within the context of the situation. Based on the responses, the following student narratives were identified (Figure 5).

Figure 5 — Student Narratives



Source: Author's own compilation

Compulsion Narrative

Students perceive that they have no other choice, or that cheating is necessary given the circumstances. This narrative often builds on lack of time, overload, and fear of failure. *"Fear of failing, expectations, stress, lack of time."*

Relativizing Narrative

Students compare their behavior to that of others, justifying it by noting that others do the same or that the environment makes cheating easier. This narrative serves to rationalize actions based on social norms and situational factors. *"Others are doing it, so why not?"*

Utilitarian Narrative

Students rationalize cheating through a cost–benefit logic, where the advantages of the action (better grades, easier passing) outweigh the risks. *"Low risk, high reward."*

Anti-Curriculum Narrative

In this narrative, students question the relevance of the course content and justify cheating by arguing that the subject or instruction does not warrant the effort invested. "*Most courses have no professional value, so cheating carries less weight."*

Technological Narrative

Students use the opportunities provided by modern tools and the online environment as self-justifications. This includes, for example, the use of AI tools as learning support and the easier access to online exam materials. *"Easier solution, doesn't require studying."*

Student narratives indicate that cheating is not merely about circumventing rules, but is shaped by internal stories and self-justifications. For educational institutions, this means that combating cheating does not end with the implementation of strict rules and supervisory measures. More effective strategies may include ethical dialogue, understanding students' motivations and internal narratives, instructors' role modeling, and enhancing the relevance and transparency of the curriculum. In this way, institutions can not only reduce the opportunities for cheating but also influence students' internal acceptance, fostering genuine learning and responsible behavior.

The other open-ended question asked students for their ideas on how to reduce cheating in online exams. The most frequently occurring words related to this topic in the responses are shown in the word cloud in Figure 6.

Figure 6 — Most Frequently Occurring Expressions in Student Responses on Reducing Cheating

Source: Author's own compilation

Students approach the reduction of cheating from several perspectives (Figure 7). These can be grouped into three main categories:

- Technological solutions
- Exam organization and format
- Instructor attitude and pedagogy

Figure 7 — Possibilities for Reducing Cheating Based on Student Responses

Main Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Example from Responses
Technical Solutions in Online Exam Systems	Screen sharing / blocking	7	"Screen sharing"; "Exams should be accessible through proctoring software that blocks browser and other programs on the computer."
	Multiple cameras / webcam	9	"Multiple camera angles"; "Enable webcam and microphone during online exams."
	Secure browser / software restrictions	4	"Using a secure browser"; "Platforms that notify if a student switches tabs."
Exam Organization and Format	In-person exam (mostly written)	12	"Fewer online exams, more in-person exams"; "The more important the course, the more it should avoid online exams."
	Time limits and task design	6	"Possibly slightly shorter time limits for assessments"; "Fewer questions or more time to allow students to think through their answers."
	Project / practical tasks	3	"Project tasks can circumvent the problem and better reflect the student's experience."
	Oral exam	5	"I would only use oral exams, because you can often see the student's reaction."
Instructor Attitude and Pedagogy	Instructor role / quality of teaching	6	"If I pay a lot of money to learn a profession, I want to actually learn, not just get a certificate; I am paying for knowledge and teaching, not just a paper."

Source: Author's own compilation

Based on students' opinions, reducing cheating in online exams requires the combined application of several factors (Figure 8). Technical tools, such as screen sharing, webcams, or secure browsers, are useful but not sufficient on their own. Proper exam organization and task design are also important, including optimizing time limits, using varied task types, and incorporating project-based and oral exams. Additionally, the pedagogical approach is crucial: fostering honesty and designing assessments that measure genuine knowledge are at least as important as technical controls. The responses also indicate that completely eliminating cheating is nearly impossible; therefore, rethinking the purpose and value of exams, improving the quality of the curriculum, and authentically assessing competencies are more effective long-term strategies for reducing cheating and maintaining the integrity of education.

Figure 8 — Possibilities for Reducing Cheating Based on Student Responses

Source: Author's own compilation

Demographic Characteristics and the Acceptability of Cheating

We examined whether students' background has any influence on cheating. Figure 9 shows which demographic characteristics are significantly related to specific aspects of cheating.

Figure 9 — Demographic characteristics and the correlations with cheating

Examined Relationship	Chi-square value (χ^2)	Degrees of freedom (df)	p-value	Result
Gender × Justifiability of cheating	$\chi^2 = 9.84$	df = 4	p = 0.043	Male students are more permissive toward cheating.
Place of residence × Perceived ease of online cheating	$\chi^2 = 12.67$	df = 6	p = 0.048	Students from smaller settlements are more likely to think online cheating is easier.
Parents' educational attainment × Acceptability of cheating	$\chi^2 = 15.92$	df = 8	p = 0.044	Students with less-educated parents are more accepting of cheating.

Source: Author's own compilation

The results show that among male students, a significantly higher proportion consider cheating acceptable under certain circumstances (e.g., when the exam is perceived as too difficult). In contrast, female students tend to reject the justifiability of cheating to a greater extent, with a larger share firmly opposing it. This suggests that male students are more likely to view cheating as a rational, situational decision, while female students demonstrate stronger adherence to normative attitudes. Thus, gender differences are significant in the moral evaluation of cheating.

The type of residence is also significantly associated with perceptions of the feasibility of online cheating. Students living in smaller settlements are more likely to believe that cheating online is easier, whereas students residing in the capital tend to be more skeptical in this regard. This difference may be explained by variations in educational experiences and access to online examinations. Students from smaller towns or villages are less exposed to the technological and organizational control mechanisms

that are more common at larger universities, which may reinforce their perception that online exams are “easier to circumvent.”

Students’ propensity to cheat—particularly in the hypothetical scenario where the risk of being caught is completely eliminated—shows a significant association with parental educational attainment. Among students whose parents have lower levels of education, a higher proportion indicate that they would likely cheat under such circumstances, whereas children of parents with higher education more often display a rejecting attitude. This finding suggests that the family’s cultural capital and value system regarding learning may play a crucial role in shaping students’ ethical decisions. Children of highly educated parents are presumably more likely to bring stronger internalized norms into the educational environment, which in turn reduces their inclination to engage in cheating.

Based on the analysis, attitudes toward cheating are shaped by several demographic factors. Male students tend to adopt a more flexible moral stance on cheating, while female students are more consistent in rejecting it. Students from smaller settlements are more likely to believe that cheating is easier in an online environment compared to those living in the capital. Moreover, the children of parents with lower educational attainment are more inclined to cheat in a risk-free situation, whereas those whose parents hold higher degrees are more likely to reject such behavior. These differences highlight that attitudes toward cheating are not merely the result of individual decisions, but are closely linked to social background and processes of socialization.

Student Groups Based on Cluster Analysis

We conducted a hierarchical cluster analysis based on the Likert-scale variables related to cheating attitudes, willingness to cheat, and the use of AI tools. This allowed us to distinguish three groups of students (Figure 10).

Figure 10 — Student Groups Based on Cluster Analysis

Source: Author's own compilation

Cluster 1 (58 students) – "Strict Rejecters":
Members of this group relatively strictly reject cheating and the acceptance of aids (including AI). On average, they tend to disagree with statements suggesting that cheating is acceptable or easier in online exams (the corresponding means are around 2–3). They also regard AI tools as cheating and do not consider their supervision important (low means: AI cheating = 2.84; monitoring = 2.02). Overall, this group shows the lowest willingness and acceptance regarding both cheating and the use of AI.

Cluster 2 (42 students) – "Rule-Oriented Realists":
Students in this group are highly aware that cheating is easier in online exams (mean = 4.48) and perceive external factors as influential (e.g., if others cheat, mean = 3.83). At the same time, they strongly value rules and strict monitoring, believing that instructors strictly punish cheating (mean = 3.81), and they firmly support monitoring the use of AI tools (mean = 3.88). Interestingly, this group clearly considers AI tools to be cheating (mean = 4.55), but they acknowledge that others' use of AI does not increase their own willingness to use it. Overall, this cluster shows moderate acceptance of cheating but is characterized by a strict rule-following orientation.

Cluster 3 (89 students) – "Permissive Pragmatists":
This largest group shows the highest averages on statements indicating a willingness to cheat. They strongly agree that others' cheating increases their own likelihood of cheating (mean = 3.49), that fear intensifies the tendency to cheat, and that cheating is more likely in higher-credit courses (means around 3.5–4). Regarding AI tools, they are relatively lenient. Although they acknowledge that "using AI is cheating" (mean = 4.08) and see others' use as an incentive, they do not view monitoring as urgent (mean for AI monitoring = 2.70). Overall, this cluster is the most permissive toward both cheating and the use of technological aids.

These distinct profile patterns indicate that students can be grouped into three clearly differentiated clusters based on their attitudes toward cheating and the use of technological aids. This insight can support the development of more tailored anti-cheating strategies and educational oversight. The findings suggest that institutions should apply differentiated approaches. The first group can be reinforced in their current stance, the second group benefits from stronger regulation and transparency, while the third group requires motivational and ethical education tools, since strictness alone is likely to be less effective.

Summary
The spread of online examinations is redefining the concept of cheating in higher education. With the emergence of artificial intelligence, students now have access to tools whose use is often difficult to separate from the application of genuine knowledge. The results of the questionnaire survey show that attitudes toward cheating are not uniform. 40% of respondents (74 students) interpret AI tools as a means of supporting learning, while 60% (115 students) tend to or fully reject their use, regarding them as cheating. This division illustrates how, in the new technological environment, the concept of cheating is becoming increasingly nuanced, and ethical boundaries more uncertain, particularly in the case of online examinations.

The demographic analysis revealed that attitudes toward cheating are also shaped by factors such as gender, type of residence, and parents' educational attainment. Male students tend to evaluate the morality of cheating more flexibly, while female students are more consistent in their rejection of it. Students from smaller towns and villages are more likely to believe that cheating is easier online than those living in the capital. Similarly, students whose parents have lower educational attainment are more likely to admit they would cheat in risk-free situations, whereas the children of parents with higher education tend to reject such behavior. This highlights that attitudes toward cheating are closely linked to social background and patterns of socialization.

Cluster analysis identified three clearly distinguishable student groups:

- "Strict Rejecters" (58 students), who show the lowest willingness to cheat and the least acceptance of AI.
- "Rule-Oriented Realists" (42 students), who recognize the opportunities for cheating but believe in rules and strongly support strict monitoring.
- "Permissive Pragmatists" (89 students), who are the most tolerant toward cheating and the use of AI tools, and are less supportive of monitoring.

These profiles suggest that differentiated strategies are required to address student attitudes toward cheating and technological aids. The first group should be supported in maintaining their current stance, the second group requires stronger regulation and transparency, while the third group may benefit more from motivational and ethical education measures, as stricter control alone is unlikely to be effective.

This diversity and uncertainty point to the need for higher education institutions to rethink academic integrity norms in light of the challenges posed by the digital era. Clarifying the perception of AI use, redefining ethical frameworks, and shaping student attitudes are essential for safeguarding the credibility and value of knowledge in higher education. Universities must proactively respond to the challenges of technological development by developing comprehensive guidelines that balance the encouragement of innovation with the preservation of academic integrity. This includes the responsible integration of AI-based tools into education, the updating of examination procedures and regulations, and the regular training of both students and instructors in the ethical and conscious use of technology.

Based on the findings, three key directions can be identified for higher education institutions:

1. Developing clear institutional policies regarding the acceptable use of AI tools in assessments.
2. Redesigning assessment methods toward more authentic and competence-based evaluation.
3. Strengthening ethical education and dialogue about responsible technology use.

The findings contribute to a better understanding of how university students perceive online exam cheating and the role of artificial intelligence in academic dishonesty in digital assessment environments.

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Valeria NAGY

Interpretation of workplace well-being in higher education along the analogy of collective synchronisation

Introduction

In reflecting upon the First Epistle to Timothy (1 Timothy 4:8), one may adopt as a thesis that the attainment of long life spent in good health can only be realised if, at every level and in every sphere, the necessary actions are taken – or, where appropriate, certain forms of conduct are consciously refrained from: *"For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come."* This imperative also manifests itself at the micro level, for example, within the workplaces of higher education institutions, in relation to academics (as employees) and students (as persons present within the scope of the work activity). Higher education is typically a sector in which multiple generations work together and diverse bodies of knowledge coexist; its advantages can – and indeed must – be harnessed to foster workplace well-being.

Well-being is a complex construct. The World Health Organization (WHO) Well-Being Index, for instance, is based on the assessment of five factors: cheerfulness and good spirits; calmness and relaxation; activity and vitality; waking feeling fresh and rested; and the presence of interesting things in everyday life. Each of these factors indicates that a satisfactory state of health, mediated through individuals (employees), also influences workplace organisations. Physical and mental well-being may positively affect employee performance, and effective workplace health protection can only be implemented where the preconditions for health are fulfilled.

With regard to mental well-being, the present paper is linked to the "Healthy Workplaces" campaigns of the EU-OSHA (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work). The 2026–2028 campaign focuses specifically on mental health at work.

An analysis of the relationship between health (as a state) and work requires a broad and systemic perspective. In connection with academic roles, the continuous – and at times near-constant – transformation of physical infrastructure and the operational environment may generate occupational safety and health problems/challenges. Solving and overcoming these problems and challenges necessitates innovations and transformations grounded in cooperation, shared reflection, and collaborative creation. In other words, to achieve the desired outcomes, cooperation is essential – whether in employee–employee or employee–employer relations, and extending to those within the scope of the work activity. Where such cooperation is ensured, stakeholders can jointly generate ideas to solve problems and overcome challenges, and subsequently implement their concepts collectively.

It is a fact that innovations support effective occupational safety and health management; however, certain "novelties" emerge whose impacts are not yet fully understood. From an occupational safety perspective, these too will affect the employees (the academics), and thus, occupational health and safety itself becomes a domain of continuous innovation. It should be noted that workplace health protection constitutes an employer's obligation, whereas workplace health maintenance and health promotion are typically defined as responsibilities or tasks. Yet these may more accurately be regarded as problems, insofar as there may be incomplete knowledge concerning the current situation, the desired target state, or the methods required for implementation, specifically in relation to:

- the workplace itself and/or
- the employees and/or
- the environment and working conditions and/or
- those present within the scope of the work activity.

From the perspective of both effective workplace health protection and health maintenance and promotion, such (early-stage) problems should be construed as opportunities. Their identification, analysis, and resolution are formulated as objectives to achieve a higher level of organisational functioning and create workplace well-being.

In higher education workplaces, the primary target group comprises academics; however, academics' working culture and health-related behaviours undoubtedly influence those within the scope of the work activity, for example, students.

The system of workplace health protection, health maintenance, and health promotion

The concept of health was defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1948 as follows: *"Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."* Subsequently, the same organisation reviewed this definition (in 1984) and formulated (in 1986) the comprehensive definition still in use today: *"Health is the extent to which an individual or group is able to realise aspirations and satisfy needs, and to change or cope with the environment. Health is a resource for everyday life, not the objective of living; it is a positive concept, emphasising social and personal resources, as well as physical capacities."* (URL1) This concept has consistently appeared in everyday life in connection with work activity. Within the Member States of the EU, Council Directive 89/391/EEC on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work stipulates the necessity of *"the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work"* (thus establishing occupational safety and health implementation at the workplace as an employer obligation). The protection of individuals engaged in organised work activity is therefore encompassed by occupational safety and health legislation (Act XCIII of 1993), the domains of which comprise occupational safety, occupational health (occupational hygiene and occupational medicine), and social aspects of labour protection. It should be noted that, in part, the workplace is also a setting for

- health maintenance (the support of a health-promoting lifestyle and of the social, economic, environmental, and personal factors that encourage it), and
- health promotion (the process that enables individuals (as employees) and micro-communities (as workplaces) to exert greater control over the preservation and improvement of their health).

Workplace exposures affecting employees derive from (Ungváry–Morvai, 2010; Erősné, 2024):

- the work activity itself (which may be mechanical (physical), psychological (emotional), mental (cognitive), or physiological),
- working conditions (workplace circumstances) and
- the working environment (which may be physical, chemical, biological, ergonomic, or psychosocial in nature).

From the perspective of health maintenance and promotion, however, the decisive factor is the total 24-hour load imposed on the human organism (Ungváry–Morvai, 2010), which, beyond the aforementioned workplace exposures, also includes the following health determinant components:

- the physical environment (buildings, settlement characteristics, residential activities),
- the social environment (family, relatives, friends, the wider community) and
- the effects of lifestyle and life conduct (Ádány et al., 2023; Erősné, 2024).

Employees are simultaneously and collectively exposed to these influences, among which certain factors are not directly measurable but may only be estimated. Within academic roles in higher education, examples include certain ergonomic and psychosocial risks. Workload (exposure) results in strain. It is important to note that the magnitude and nature of strain depend not only on the workload

but also on the individual performing the work, owing to individual differences in response reactions. The optimisation of strain is therefore achievable solely on the basis of knowledge of both workplace exposure and the working individual's work capacity (functional capacity plus health status). Strain may be regarded as optimal (or approaching optimal) if and only if:

- the workload is less than (or at most equal to) and
- The strain is likewise less than (or at most equal to) the employee's work capacity.

The creative intellectual activity closely associated with academic posts is classified, from the perspective of occupational medical fitness examinations, as one of the activities involving increased psychological load (Decree 33/1998 [VI. 24.] of the Ministry of Welfare). In the presence of disturbing stimuli, and particularly in creative intellectual work performed under complex rules and instructions, it is necessary not only to reduce workload but also to enhance the adaptive capacity of the human organism. To this end, following an analysis of work processes, it is necessary to examine how the individual appears and functions within those processes. Through workload–strain analysis, the permissible limits of performance capacity and load tolerance of the working individual may be determined. On the basis of these findings, principles of work organisation may be outlined, and working conditions, workplace circumstances, and the working environment may be modified accordingly (Nagy, 2025). Feedback following the completion of occupational safety tasks identified through workplace risk assessment may reveal deficiencies, omissions, or changes affecting health protection. The remaining (early-stage) problems conceal underlying "needs".

Within the process of health maintenance and promotion that supports adequate and effective occupational safety and health practice, the responsibility of the individual, as an employee, together with their health-promoting lifestyle and health behaviour, is indisputable. This undoubtedly requires the employee attributes projected in a recent report by the World Economic Forum (WEF) (WEF, 2025). The report identifies the following top five competencies:

- analytical thinking,
- resilience, flexibility, and agility,
- leadership skills and social influence,
- creative thinking,
- motivation and self-awareness.

These share the common feature that each is essential to effective occupational safety and health practice, and that each presupposes a certain degree of mental maturity. It is therefore necessary to continuously examine how mental health can be supported at every stage of life. The focus should not be confined to crisis management but should also encompass preventive measures that reduce the risk of stress, depression, and other mental disorders. Preparing individuals to manage their own health actively (self-management) assumes particular importance.

With specific reference to higher education, it may be regarded as a premise that individuals (academics) and university communities must be enabled – in alignment with WHO and EU-OSHA guidance – to recognise the health potentials available to them and to make effective use of these (ideally engaging in health-promoting activities with their attendant positive externalities). Among health promotion strategies, support for mental health must therefore occupy a central position (as reflected in the aforementioned 2026–2028 Workplace Mental Health Campaign). In essence, this concerns a state of mental well-being in which individuals recognise their own abilities, are capable of coping with life's stresses, and are able to participate in community life (URL2; URL3).

From an occupational safety perspective, workplace health protection, health maintenance, and health promotion, together with the creation of workplace well-being, may be interpreted through an "onion

model" (encompassing concentric layers). The "core" is occupational safety and health itself (Erősné, 2024).

Method

With regard to (early-stage) problems related to workplace health protection, health maintenance, and health promotion (identification of type, solution process, mode of solution), the Bartee approach (Bartee, 1973) provides a useful framework for focused analysis. Within this framework, issues may be examined in the interrelation of complexity, uncertainty, and time dependence, thereby forming the basis for (risk-based) decision-making.

An occupational safety and health problem constitutes an existing difficulty or challenge that requires resolution in order to prevent it from becoming a potential future threat. A problem may be regarded as solved when the perceived current situation and the desired situation are considered identical (Bartee, 1973). This approach to problem-solving supports both risk analysis (assessment, management, and communication) and the process of workplace risk assessment (the ranking of existing or anticipated risks). It is upon the latter that workplace health protection measures are founded, and it likewise provides the basis for health maintenance, health promotion, and workplace well-being programmes.

The process of problem-solving and its stages of application comprise:

- identification of the problem type (closed or open),
- determination of the mode of solution (individual, group-based, organisational, societal),
- specification of the solution process (exact/analytical or creativity-driven).

The recognition of occupational safety-related (early-stage) problems and the determination of their type typically occur simultaneously. In most cases, open-type problems can be identified. Such problems are characterised by the possibility of multiple solutions; resolution is grounded in creativity (often resulting in distinctive and high-impact outcomes); the boundary and limiting conditions are flexible; concrete solutions frequently depart from strictly logical approaches; and the solution process is, in most instances, non-algorithmic.

Interpretation of workplace well-being in higher education

On the basis of its activities as an employer, a higher education institution is classified, from an occupational safety perspective, within Hazard Class II (Decree 5/1993 [XII. 26.] of the Ministry of Labour). The institutes and departments of higher education institutions – as workplaces – may typically be regarded as dynamic micro-environments. This is coupled with the inherent complexity characterising academic roles. Reference to academic posts may suggest work performed in front of the lectern (teaching); however, alongside time devoted to teaching, a substantial proportion of working time is allocated to research and scholarly activity, which in recent years has been supplemented by societal engagement and intensified administrative responsibilities. Consequently, specific hazards, exposures, and risks may emerge.

In the course of work associated with academic posts in higher education, the most characteristic problems linked to particular tasks primarily involve psychosocial, ergonomic, psychological, and cognitive burdens. Corresponding actions may be assigned to these, identifying workplace health maintenance and health promotion opportunities, while bearing in mind that disease burden diminishes academic effectiveness and the capacity and willingness to engage in innovation and transformation.

Let the subject area of health protection, health maintenance, and health promotion, together with workplace well-being in higher education, be considered. Interpreting this domain as a coupled, multi-component system, the Kuramoto model helps understand its functioning and effects. The Kuramoto model provides a mathematical framework for structuring the formal components of the system

through the analogy of the collective synchronisation of multiple interacting oscillators (Kuramoto, 1975). The model can describe and illustrate real phenomena.

Within the model, each oscillator possesses its own frequency and phase, and oscillators are weakly coupled. The purpose of the interaction is for the oscillators' phases to become synchronised over time. A model approximation is that the interaction acts solely on the phases. Each oscillator is influenced by the others through their phase differences. Parametrically, this may be represented by the following nonlinear differential equation:

$$\frac{\partial \theta_i}{\partial t} = \omega_i + \frac{K}{N} \sum_{j=1}^{N} \sin(\theta_j - \theta_i)$$

Applied to the subject under investigation, the model comprises the following components and characteristics:

- oscillator – academics possess an individual “natural frequency” (e.g., individual stress tolerance, personal health behaviour, individual workload rhythm, personal work–life (im)balance) (ω_i);
- phase – a time-varying, environmentally sensitive characteristic (e.g., current health status, level of workload; this may be analogous to mental load, stress state, energy level, or degree of regeneration) ($\theta_i(t)$) ;
- interactions derived from phase differences – group effects (analogous to collegial support, departmental working culture, shared workload peaks (e.g., marking periods, administrative surges, managerial performance expectations, work stoppages)); where interaction is strong, members of the work group become synchronised (e.g., becoming fatigued or regenerating simultaneously) ($\sin(\theta_j–\theta_i)$) ;
- coupling strength – the extent to which organisational regulation and support influence system stability (strong organisational support – harmonised workload; weak organisational support – deterioration of health) (K).

Within the model, the degree of synchronisation is indicated by the order parameter, which can be interpreted as an organisational diagnostic. It assumes values between 0 and 1 (1 – complete synchronisation: aligned, stable and balanced workload, though potentially excessively intensified; 0 – fragmentation: substantial individual differences and heterogeneous workload distribution). In operating the system, sub-objectives may include balancing workload, reducing stress peaks, understanding collective rhythms, and recognising the role of organisational synchronisation in health protection, maintenance, and promotion.

Health protection pillar

Applying the Bartee approach, both the type of occupational safety-related problem and the mode of its resolution may be identified, together with the nature of the required action. Estimable exposures and problems that fall within acceptable and tolerable categories call for scheduled measures; thus, the employer is advised to respond. In other cases, action is required, meaning that the employer must intervene. Among the possible measures is the application of subliminal (below-threshold) messages. Workplace occupational safety practices may incorporate stimuli or suggestive messages of short duration and/or high intensity that are not consciously perceived but are processed by the brain and may influence behaviour.

With regard to academics, the sources of workplace risks arising from work activities are typically psychological (emotional) and cognitive (mental), while those arising from the working environment include ergonomic and psychosocial exposures, as well as effects of working conditions. Together, these constitute the total job-related workload.

Problems posing a threat to employees' (academics') health (Act XCIII of 1993, Section 87(13)) must therefore be identified. It should be noted that a hazard becomes a risk (Act XCIII of 1993, Section 87(1/F)) if it is capable of materialising.

Problems and controls/measures from an occupational safety perspective (non-exhaustive list):

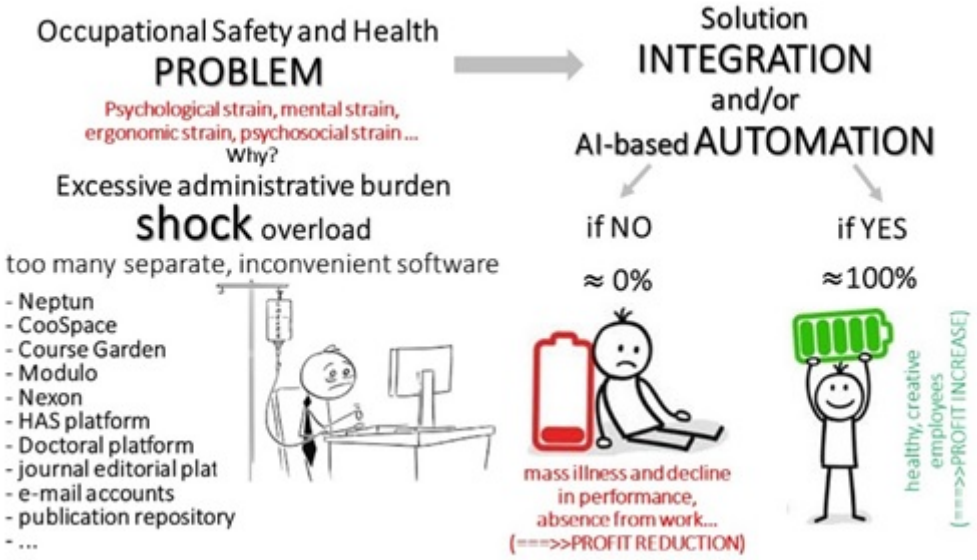
- multi-focused work within the academic sphere (potentially elevated stress levels) ∴, regular communication training, stress management training;
- flexible working hours combined with continuous availability ∴, ensuring opportunities for detachment; establishing clear boundaries between work and private life;
- regulation-centred operation ∴ application of artificial intelligence for search and harmonisation purposes;
- compressed teaching blocks; breaks used for preparation and travel between campuses ∴, a maximum of three teaching blocks (75 minutes per block); provision of genuine breaks;
- preparation of teaching materials, drawing, intensive use of Information and Communication Technology tools ∴, touchscreen and digital pen-enabled devices; adjustable workstations designed with enhanced consideration of MSZ EN ISO 9241-5:2001 and MSZ EN ISO 26800:2012;
- blurring of work–life boundaries; spread of atypical employment forms ∴, ensuring the possibility of disengagement;
- grant writing (resource generation) in a multicultural environment ∴ reduction of administrative burden, bridging time-zone differences;
- complexity of job tasks (mandatory use of numerous software systems; time pressure; tight deadlines; malfunctioning systems) (technostress) (URL4) ∴ modification of work schedules; application of the results of technical development (Act XCIII of 1993, Section 18(1));
- disciplinary advancement; continuous individual training and self-development support for regenerative capacity;
- fast work pace as a stress factor, preference for a gradual and evenly distributed workload;
- extension of laptop usage time and human "operating time" genuinely "disconnected" breaks; regular opportunities for physical, mental, and emotional recovery.

Academic posts are inherently complex. In the course of work, owing to the intensified use of digital devices and software, or changes in employment forms, newly emerging risks must be addressed alongside – or instead of – already known risks, and existing risks may also intensify. The issue of software ergonomics (Izsó–Antalovits, 2000) – understood as supporting human information processing through the design of software user interfaces (typically screen-based information exchange) – is increasingly important. The impact of (excessive) screen time on individuals' mental health likewise warrants particular attention.

At the same time, scientific and technological development offers opportunities: under favourable conditions, diseases may be prevented, (early-stage) problems may be resolved, and risks may be managed and reduced.

The effects of intensified administration, software proliferation, and their consequences, as well as the health-preserving role of artificial intelligence, are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 — From lecturer to “weary” bureaucrat



In relation to academic posts, the emergence of pathological workplace stress (distress) must also be examined (Nagy, 2025). Increased psychological burden (creative intellectual activity, responsibility, screen-based work) and the psychosocial aetiological factors of the work environment may induce substantial mental effort. Psychosocial risks are primarily related to the design, organisation, and management of work (e.g., long working hours, continuous availability, work–life imbalance, intensification of work, increased employee vulnerability, excessive ‘lean’ initiatives, the constant necessity of “self-development”, etc.), yet they are also closely linked to the changing economic and social environment. The development of distress requiring intervention, however, presupposes individual predisposing factors.

To illustrate stress, a parallel may be drawn between a specialised field of psychology – namely, the resolution of pathological workplace stress – and a specialised field of engineering, safety science. In (technical) engineering design and dimensioning, once the load-induced strain is determined, the resulting stress can be calculated, and a form and material must be selected that can withstand the applied load without damage and with (multiple) safety margins. In both senses, stress arises, which must under no circumstances exceed tolerable limits or impair functioning. Moreover, from an engineering perspective, positive stress may be just as hazardous as negative stress. This raises the question: alongside distress, may eustress also constitute a comparable occupational risk?

It may further be noted that health complaints attributable to or associated with ergonomic aetiological factors predominantly involve musculoskeletal disorders; visual fatigue is also common (although currently not regarded as a direct cause of occupational disease).

Excess (unnecessary) workload affecting academics must be reduced, and their “flexible” but continuous availability must be moderated so as to include as few fatiguing activities as possible and allow sufficient time for regeneration. Otherwise, efficiency declines (under conditions of significant informational load, this may be accompanied by disorganisation of thinking). In sport, we have learned to attune ourselves to specific forms of movement and to disengage from movement phases; warm-up and stretching form integral parts of the process. In occupational activity, however, this principle is not necessarily observed. Nor is it forward-looking for higher education academic posts to be characterised by excessive overall occupational load lasting several months, even if followed by one or two weeks of optimal demand or genuine “switching off”. It resembles repeatedly injuring the same finger: by the time it is bandaged, permanent effects may have occurred, and functionality may be impaired.

The workplace health protection measures outlined above are fundamentally based on the employer's risk assessment (i.e., the ranking of actual or anticipated risks). A workplace risk assessment should also include lifestyle-related risks. Smoking, for example, is a characteristic health behaviour; alongside traditional tobacco use, the innovation of e-cigarettes has emerged, the full effects of which are not yet comprehensively understood.

In nations with advanced work cultures, occupational safety systems consider all three levels of adverse health impact:

- load,
- endangerment,
- damage-causing effect.

The occupational health and safety management system (MSZ ISO 45001:2018) prioritises the effective functioning of the workplace organisation. It adopts a process-based approach: the avoidance of hazards (as potential causes of injury and/or health impairment) constitutes its driving principle.

The health maintenance pillar

Adequate and effective workplace operational health and safety practice must be complemented by health maintenance. Conditions for the success of health maintenance programmes include assessing baseline health status (including self-report), focusing on mental health (as the foundation of overall health and well-being), and integrating into everyday higher education culture. Maintaining academic staff health is important not only at the individual level but also constitutes an operational risk from the employer’s perspective. Among the most common workplace health risk factors – alongside stress, physical inactivity, and poor nutrition – are insufficient sleep and reduced effective presence at work (presenteeism) (URL5). Presenteeism refers to the phenomenon in which employees perform their duties while mentally or physically exhausted or ill. In higher education (among academic staff), this frequently occurs due to heightened performance expectations, limited substitutability, financial considerations, and related factors.

A distinctive occupational health and safety feature of complex roles is that mutually reinforcing burdens approach the limits of work capacity. Accordingly, in formulating specific health maintenance recommendations, guidance may be drawn from occupational fitness-for-work assessments, that is, determining what level of strain is imposed on the individual by activities performed within a given teaching role under varying work environments and conditions (e.g. office, lecture hall, seminar room, teaching laboratory), and how sustainably the individual will be able to meet these demands over the long term.

In designing work processes, consideration must be given to protecting the health of academic staff (or at least ensuring that health is not endangered). From a health maintenance perspective, it is important that work favourably influences well-being and facilitates task performance, particularly by avoiding both excessive and insufficient demands. Excessive physical or sensory demands (upper threshold) lead to fatigue, whereas insufficient demands or monotonous work (lower threshold) reduce attentiveness. Occupational hygiene examinations (Act XCIII of 1993, Section 87(5/A)) support the formulation of adequate and effective recommendations and decisions.

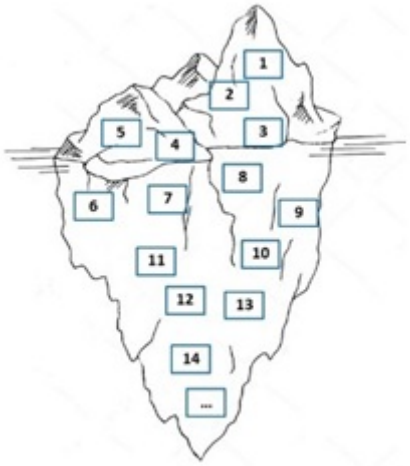
It is forward-looking that artificial intelligence may create a world in which continuous adaptation, tracking of innovations, and learning will be necessary, yet the safest work processes will protect the individual's and the employee’s health. It supports cognitive fitness (Lovretity, 2015), understood as the optimised capacity for thinking, reasoning, learning, planning, and adaptation, thereby enabling problem-solving and the management of stress and change (Lupien et al., 2007).

The health promotion pillar

In the higher education sector, early-stage resolution of early-stage problems (related to occupational health and safety) leads to the realisation of health maintenance, and health promotion likewise gains meaningful expression.

The iceberg model (Freud, 1915) illustrates (Figure 2) that in occupational health and safety contexts, it is insufficient to focus solely on what is visible or perceptible. The most "cost-effective" outcomes, development opportunities, and innovations always lie in early intervention; therefore, hidden (surface-proximal and deep-level) problems (early-stage problems) must also be identified and addressed.

Figure 2 — The iceberg model



Perceptible problems: action (1) vs omission (2), attitudes and behaviours not conducive to health (3), compromised ergonomics concealed behind public procurement processes (4), complex job tasks (5)

Hidden, near-surface problems: habits (6), lack of information (7), unwritten rules (8), individual tolerance thresholds (9), use of immature technologies (10), group dynamics (11)

Hidden, deep-level problems (early-stage problems): non-volitional unsafe behaviours (12), income-related barriers (13), single but determining events (14), etc.

Prioritisation is challenging, as certain problems occur in parallel or manifest synergistically, in which case divergent (creativity-demanding) problem-solving approaches may yield multiple breakthrough solutions.

Resolving (early-stage) problems serves multiple objectives:

- preventing escalation, thereby avoiding the emergence of hazards,
- serving health protection,
- creating opportunities for health maintenance,
- encouraging health promotion.

If health-focused developments gain ground in higher education workplaces, they will also positively influence universities' (as economic actors) innovative and transformative capacities. Among the key domains of health promotion, the following activities may be effectively implemented within higher education workplaces (linked to nutrition, alcohol consumption, physical activity, rest, sleep screening, time management planning, and reflective thinking):

- development of individual skills (e.g., life-management skills within health management),

- community actions and initiatives (operation of lecturer–student communities within higher education),
- establishment of health-supportive conditions and environments (workplace and home aesthetics).

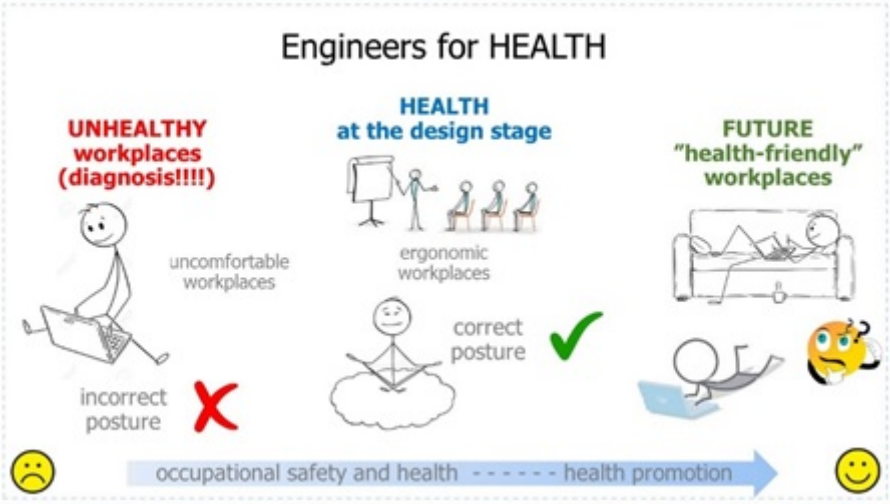
Workplace health promotion activities and programmes in higher education may thus be organised along the core principles of health promotion. These initiatives need not be confined to higher education institutions; they may also be implemented in other settings or in temporary community-based contexts (e.g., events). However, the specific nature of each health promotion activity, the instruments applied, and the expected outcomes must always be clearly defined.

By analogy with the Kuramoto model, academics (lecturers) and students may, under optimal conditions, jointly form a health-generating and health-promoting milieu. They exert reciprocal influence upon one another. This group effect constitutes a key factor in achieving optimal health and embedding patterns necessary for its maintenance. At universities comprising multiple faculties (and numerous degree programmes), interfaculty open days (e.g., a “Health Week”) may provide a framework for involving academics (as employees) and students (as persons present within the scope of work), while harnessing the inherent complexity of generational diversity. Examples include:

- screening and self-examination programmes delivered by medical doctors/medical students,
- medication safety consultations provided by pharmacists/pharmacy students,
- self-awareness groups facilitated by mental health professionals/psychology students,
- exercise sessions organised by recreation specialists/physical education teacher trainees,
- muscle balance and rehabilitation practices offered by healthcare professionals/physiotherapy students,
- Solfeggio frequency circles led by artists/music students,
- ergonomics-oriented design initiatives and diagnosis of “unhealthy workplaces” by engineers/engineering students (Figure 3),
- nature walks organised by agricultural specialists/agricultural engineering students.

These ideas and proposals do not require organisational restructuring; they can be effectively realised within the current higher education framework.

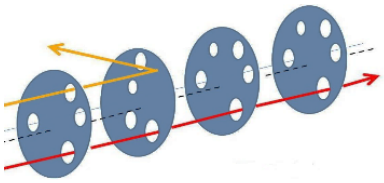
Figure 3 — Health programme poster



If the Swiss cheese model (Reason, 1998, 2000) is interpreted in relation to health promotion – where the holes represent opportunities, yet the arrangement of the slices may be such that a given health

promotion initiative is unable to pass through – this state indicates problems, environmental factors, conditions, regulations, performance requirements, etc., that hinder or render health promotion impossible. The objective is therefore to create a "cheese-slice system" in which, through the application of individual slices, safe and health-neutral work can be realised with minimal obstacles to workplace health promotion. Conditions must be established that allow these opportunities to pass through (Figure 4).

Figure 4 — Reason's Swiss cheese model



Source: (after URL6)

Notes: the lower (red) arrow indicates a successful health promotion; the upper (yellow) arrow indicates a blocked health promotion opportunity.

Results and Conclusions

In higher education, the complex nature of academic work and the variable micro-environments of individual workplaces necessitate a deeper analysis of the interrelations between work and health. The (early-stage) problems arising from different teaching tasks reveal potential shortcomings in workplace health protection, while also outlining opportunities and barriers for health maintenance and health promotion.

One precondition for the effective functioning of higher education is workplace well-being, closely linked to human infrastructure. Within higher education, it is not the ultimate root causes that must be sought; rather, centralisation should be moderated. By resolving identified (early-stage) problems through the application of local optima, workplace well-being can be achieved. The necessary human and material infrastructure, as well as opportunities for health literacy, are available to support this. An interpretation of workplace well-being analogous to the Kuramoto model illustrates that academics (lecturers) behave as synchronised oscillators, generating coordinated patterns with stable phase differences. The entities operate together, align, and evolve.

All forms of digitalisation are to be welcomed; however, they imperceptibly burden the individual as an employee, since "work" is thereby carried everywhere, along with its associated elements, making detachment impossible. Software, hardware, and other IT systems can update and recharge even during operation, unlike the human organism. Information and communication technologies, as well as various online applications, serve as examples. Conditioning mechanisms must also be considered: if a behaviour is rewarded with even slight enjoyment, repetition is likely to follow.

The modern world of work – characterised by globalisation, technological development and industrial transformation – presents new challenges, making dynamic and innovative approaches indispensable as complements to "traditional" occupational safety measures.

An innovation-oriented perspective directs attention towards applying mature and effective technologies and harnessing artificial intelligence in the service of occupational health and safety, health maintenance, and health promotion. Simulation of the Swiss cheese model helps identify where opportunities are blocked and which layers require the opening of a "hole". The goal is to establish a permeable structure by eliminating unsynchronised, poorly aligned, and non-converging slices. The conditions for achieving this are present within higher education institutions.

Environmental influence is strong; however, we continuously reshape the environment:

- technological development ⋱ transforming job tasks and workplace characteristics,
- multigenerational and multicultural workplaces ⋱ generating complex psychosocial challenges,
- Introduction of new technologies ⋱ producing unexplored health effects,
- opportunities for home working ⋱, blurring work–life boundaries,
- creation of complex roles ⋱ approaching work capacity limits through mutually reinforcing burdens.

It may be concluded that the opportunities grounded in effective workplace occupational health and safety practice must be interpreted in relation to tasks assigned to academic roles and the changing material infrastructure and operational environment. An additional asset lies in the "convergence of generations" characteristic of higher education.

Summary and Outlook

Every work process—including most tasks associated with academic posts in higher education—comprises varying proportions of physical and intellectual components. Within individual subprocesses, the determining factors are the proportions involved, the nature of the burden, and the type of strain imposed. In the case of academics (lecturers), intellectual work combined with intensive technology use clearly entails mental (neurological) and psychological (emotional) strain. Given that the fundamental principle and intention of occupational health is the prevention of occupational diseases, it is justified to explore workplace health maintenance and promotion opportunities alongside health protection tasks and measures. The Bartee approach focused on potential (early-stage) problems in academic work. Behind such problems is always an underlying need; accordingly, opportunities and tasks for health protection, maintenance, and promotion became delineable. The selection and successful implementation of programmes depend upon cooperation, joint reflection, and co-creation among employers, employees (academics), and those present within the scope of work (students). This anticipates that any programme will produce multiple effects.

Health protection, maintenance, and promotion in higher education may be identified as an interconnected, multi-component dynamic system, within which workplace well-being represents a form of dynamic equilibrium. Its characteristics include temporal variability (e.g., health status, workload), the operation of feedback mechanisms (positive and negative), and interdependence among elements. Health protection is ensured by external regulatory mechanisms, such as prescriptions and protective measures; health maintenance proposals and actions stabilise processes; and change-generating mechanisms advance health promotion. Feedback processes constitute the basis of system optimisation.

The extent to which individuals perceive their health status as their own responsibility forms part of health-related attitudes. Such attitudes may either serve or endanger health. They may also be active (doing something) or passive (abstaining from something). The health-focused behaviour of academic staff exerts both direct and indirect influence on students (e.g., through attitude formation and role modelling).

As a potential continuation of this topic, prior to (risk-based) final decisions, proposed measures should be analysed in relation to complexity, uncertainty, and time dependence. The effectiveness of interventions may be assessed, for example, using the Work Ability Index (WAI). The ultimate outcome is healthy living and workplace well-being – objectives that are also reflected among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

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Károly ZERÉNYI & Zsuzsa MÁTRAI

The role of transferable skills in the educational mismatch of employed graduates

Introduction

In the labour market, there is a simultaneous educational match corresponding to the level of higher education qualification and/or the field of specialization of the degree, and a mismatch differing from it in one or both respects. While employers often consider general competences (transferable skills) more important, higher education institutions basically prioritize professional (job-specific) skills (Vincze, 2013; Derényi & Vámos, 2015). However, when looking at the labour market placement of students leaving higher education, we see a tendency toward a weaker connection between degree and job requirements (Mátrai, 2016). With this in mind, we think that in higher education institutions, in addition to job-specific skills, more emphasis should be placed on the development of transferable skills. The aim of this research is to identify the factors influencing the educational mismatch of employed graduates, especially the role of transferable skills, in a field (tourism and catering) where the proportion of those employed in a mismatch form is higher than average.

Literature background

The employer's demand and the employee's supply often do not coincide, leading to a typical imbalance in the labour market (Zimmer, 2012). While previously this mainly resulted in unemployment, it has now been a labour shortage for a long time. In the latter case, the demand for employees permanently exceeds the supply of employees willing to work at a specific place and time, for a given wage, and under the given working conditions (Barnow, Trutko & Piatak, 2013). If demand and supply are in balance at the aggregate level, but employers cannot find adequately qualified employees in a given segment of the labour market, then we are talking about a qualitative or structural labour shortage or skill mismatch (Reymen, Gerard, De Beer, Lutz, Paskov, Di Stasio, Donlevy, Atkinson, Makulec, Famira-Mühlberger & Meierkord, 2015; Nagy & Konya, 2017; Eurofound, 2021). Students graduating from higher education are not necessarily placed in a (match/congruent) job that matches their level of education and/or their field of specialization, meaning that they also have both match/congruent and mismatch/incongruent employment.

Regarding the relationship between degree and job requirements, we can distinguish between vertical and horizontal matching. When a person is employed in a job that matches their level of education, it is vertical; when a person is employed in a job that matches their professional qualifications, it is horizontal, and when both are met, it is both vertical and horizontal matching (Fehse & Kerst, 2007; Koepernik & Wolter, 2010). A lack of any type of matching, however, means mismatching. Similar to educational matching, there are basically two types of mismatching (Leuze & Strauß, 2008; Cedefop, 2010; McGuinness, Pouliakas & Redmond, 2017; Salas-Valesco, 2021; Cabrera & Mariel, 2024). Vertical mismatch occurs when an employed person's level of education does not correspond to job requirements due to overeducation or undereducation (Senarath & Patabendige, 2014; Morgado, Sequeira, Santos, Lopes & Reis, 2014; Mahuteau, Mavromaras, Sloane & Wei, 2014). A horizontal mismatch occurs when a person performs an occupation or job that is different from his or her professional qualifications.

In the changed labour market environment, employers often cannot find adequately qualified employees; therefore, among the expectations, greater emphasis is placed on those competencies and knowledge elements that can be transferred from one area to another. However, there is no generally accepted definition of transferable skills (Molnár, 2002; Albalawi, Zalat, El-Akkad, Deghash, & Ramadan, 2011; Joynes, Rossignoli, & Amonoo-Kuofi, 2019; Andersson, 2023). If transferable skills are interpreted from the perspective of knowledge concepts, we can capture them in pairings such as objective–subjective, situational–non-situational, contextualized–decontextualized knowledge, which can also represent the endpoints of a scale (Csapó, 2001). The concept pair of job-specific and transferable

skills can also be included in this scheme, which can serve as a compass for research from a particular perspective. Job-specific skills combine situational and context-specific knowledge, while transferable skills are knowledge that can be applied in new situations and is independent of context. All of this is also confirmed by the interpretations that we can speak of transferable skills when knowledge/skills acquired in one context can be used in another (Molnár, 2002; Albalawi et al., 2011; Setiawan, Kuntadi & Bukit, 2018). At the same time, Bruner (1968) had already drawn attention to the importance of transfer, emphasizing that the emphasis should be placed on teaching and on recognizing structure in the teaching-learning process. In the case of transferable skills, we are talking about general competencies such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and working in a team, which can be used in the *world of work and in many other areas of life, i.e., they have a transferable character.*

Research questions

In view of the research objective mentioned in the introduction, the following research questions were defined:

- Based on the evaluation of graduates, which learning and teaching methods are most and which are least suitable for acquiring transferable skills elements?
- How does the usability of job-specific and transferable skills change among graduates depending on whether it is educational match/mismatch?

Research methodology

When selecting the target group, as mentioned in the introduction, the choice was made for a field where educational mismatch occurs to a greater extent than average among graduates. Based on the research results of the Integration of Administrative Databases (IAD) and the Graduate Career Tracking System[1], the majority of students graduating in the tourism and catering undergraduate programme in 2014/2015 were still in matching/congruent jobs, while the majority of students graduating in 2020/2021 (52%) were in non-degree work, i.e. were employed in a mismatching (an incongruent) way[2].

On the employee side, we asked students who graduated from tourism and catering[3] and/or tourism management programme, whom we tried to reach through the alumni and career offices of the selected institutions (although we did not completely succeed). Graduates from the higher education institutions included in the research were able to complete the online questionnaire in the second semester of 2022, in which the questions were organized into thematic groups.

[1]The population (number of graduates) consists of those who graduated between the academic years 2014/2015 and 2020/2021. The data reflect the labour market status in December 2022.

[2]It has to be noted that compared to the total proportion of students graduating in the field of economics, which includes the undergraduate degree in tourism and catering, the proportion of educational mismatch was higher regardless of the year of graduation, as was the case with graduates of the related tourism management master's programme.

[3]Including catering and hotel, as well as tourism and hotel management programme launched before the Bologna process.

Figure 1 — The thematical structure of the questionnaire

Topics	Question groups	Questions adapted or modified from another research
General socio-demographic features	1 – 4.	–
Qualification data	5 – 12.	–
Job-specific skills – transferable skills in the qualification programme	13 – 16.	–
Employment orientation	17 – 21.	–
Educational match/mismatch based on current work	22 – 29.	24 – 27.
Educational match/mismatch before the Covid-19 pandemic	30 – 37.	33 – 36.

Figure 1 shows that when compiling the questionnaire, I also used questions from other research in two thematic question groups, which were included in the 2009 HEGESCO research[4] and in several Hungarian Graduate Career Tracking System (GCTS) surveys. Research results can be compared along partially or fully identical questions, taking into account possible methodological differences.

The reason for GDPR regulations[5], the higher education institutions involved in this research were only able to share the online questionnaire with limited access among graduates, and students encounter relatively much empirical research, so in the end, a total of 110 people from 9 higher education institutions[6] completed the questionnaire, the vast majority of whom were bachelor or college-level graduates. Based on the population data, we weighted the sample in order to expand the scope of validity and improve the generalizability of the results. The number of graduates from the examined bachelor's and master's programs between 2008 and 2020, broken down by institution and gender, can be calculated from the higher education statistical data published by the Educational Authority. Accordingly, it was possible to weight two variables (institutional background and gender) in the sample.

For the processing of the data from the questionnaire and for the mathematical-statistical analyses, we used the IBM SPSS and CogStat[7] as well as ROP-R software[8]. The first two software complement each other, as the former is well applicable for managing and weighting the data set and variables, while statistical analyses can be performed faster and in fewer steps with the latter.

Comparing results with possible internal and external reference points

The answers in the questionnaire survey can be examined not only within the given question group, but also among themselves according to specific criteria, and can be compared with the answers given to questions taken without changes or modified from methodologically relevant Hungarian and international surveys. In the following, we analysed the responses from the labour market and higher education aspects, from the perspective of connecting the two, and also taking into account job changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

[4] "Higher Education as a Generator of Strategic Competences" international research with the participation of Hungary, in which the connection between degree and occupation was investigated (HEGESCO, 2009).

[5] General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) Regulation (Eu) 2016/679 of The European Parliament and of The Council on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data

[6] Higher education institutions involved in the sample: BCE-GTK, BGE-KVIK, METU-ÜKT, DE-GTK, Edutus University, KJE, NYE, PE-GTK, PTE-KTK

[7] CogStat is a free, open-source statistical program that automatically checks the prerequisites for statistical analysis based on the scale setting of the variables, and also selects the appropriate procedure based on the professional questions (Krajcsi, 2021).

[8] ROP-R is a free, multivariate statistical software that enables comprehensive statistical analyses in three areas: regression analysis, principal component and factor analysis, and cluster analysis (Vargha, 2023).

Labour market aspect

Following the recovery from the 2008 global economic crisis, demand for labour increasingly exceeded supply, leading to labour shortages in both the European and Hungarian labour markets. Labour shortages have appeared in almost every sector of the national economy, including tourism. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 brought unemployment back, and labour shortages have once again become a defining phenomenon as the economy restarts. The students participating in the questionnaire survey considered the labour shortage an opportunity rather than a determinant in their job choices and changes. The interestingness of the work, career development, or higher income was more important.

To examine the educational match/mismatch of the surveyed students, we also utilized indirect questions[9] found in both Hungarian and international research for our own questionnaire survey. Based on the questions related to the job, vertical and horizontal match, and the answers given on education, the proportion of educational match/mismatch among the respondents can be determined.

Figure 2 — Percentage of educational match/mismatch based on current job title, by gender (N=105)

		Females (N=83)		Males(N=22)		Total (N=105)	
Vertical match		57% (N=47)		68% (N=15)		59% (N=62)	
Vertical mismatch		43% (N=36)		32% (N=7)		41% (N=43)	
Undereducation	Overeducation	8% (N=3)	92% (N=33)	29% (N=2)	71% (N=5)	12% (N=5)	88% (N=38)
Horizontal match		63% (N=52)		45% (N=10)		59% (N=62)	
Horizontal mismatch		37% (N=31)		55% (N=12)		41% (N=43)	
Vertical and horizontal match		40% (N=33)		36% (N=8)		39% (N=41)	
Vertical and horizontal mismatch		20% (N=17)		23% (N=5)		21% (N=22)	
Mixed match/mismatch[12]		40% (N=33)		41% (N=9)		40% (N=42)	

Figure 2 shows that the relative majority of students involved in the research who graduated in the field of tourism and catering were employed in matching/congruent jobs both vertically (based on their level of education) and horizontally (based on their field of study). The proportion of those employed in a match and mismatch manner is the same in both types, and the vast majority of those affected by vertical mismatch are overeducated. If we examine the results by gender, the majority of men work in horizontally incongruent/mismatch jobs that differ from their field of education.

Figure 3 — Percentage of educational match/mismatch based on current job title, by higher education institution (N=105)

		BGE (N=40)		Edutus (N=25)		KJE (N=26)		Other institutions (N=14)		Total (N=105)	
Vertical match		65% (N=26)		48% (N=12)		65% (N=17)		50% (N=7)		59% (N=62)	
Vertical mismatch		35% (N=14)		52% (N=13)		35% (N=9)		50% (N=7)		41% (N=43)	
Undereducation	Overeducation	14% (N=2)	86% (N=12)	15% (N=2)	85% (N=11)	11% (N=1)	89% (N=8)	0% (N=0)	100% (N=7)	12% (N=5)	88% (N=38)
Horizontal match		60% (N=24)		40% (N=10)		69% (N=18)		71% (N=10)		59% (N=62)	
Horizontal mismatch		40% (N=16)		60% (N=15)		31% (N=8)		29% (N=4)		41% (N=43)	
Vertical and horizontal match		45% (N=18)		24% (N=6)		46% (N=12)		36% (N=5)		39% (N=41)	
Vertical and horizontal mismatch		20% (N=8)		36% (N=9)		12% (N=3)		14% (N=2)		21% (N=22)	
Mixed match/mismatch		35% (N=14)		40% (N=10)		42% (N=11)		50% (N=7)		40% (N=42)	

Based on the sample size, two of the three higher education institutions highlighted, BGE and KJE, had a higher proportion of graduates who were employed in congruent/matching work corresponding to their level of education. However, unlike the other two institutions, the majority of graduates from

[9]The indirect questions examining vertical and horizontal match/mismatch come from the questionnaire used in the research related to the HEGESCO (Higher Education as a Generator of Strategic Competences) project. These are questions 23–25 and 32–34 in the questionnaire.

Edutus University were placed in incongruent/mismatching jobs that did not align with their level of education or field of specialization.

Higer education aspect

Higher education institutions typically place greater emphasis on job-specific (professional) skills, while the previous tables show that a significant portion of graduates, and in some fields of study, the majority, are placed in horizontally incongruent/mismatching jobs that do not correspond to their field of study.

Based on evaluations of graduates, the presence of transferable skills elements in the programme varies from institution to institution, and any differences were analysed using both the raw and weighted samples, reflecting the proportions in the population.

Figure 4 — Institutional differences in terms of the appearance of transferable skills elements[10]

Appearance of transferable skills elements / Higher education institutions	Raw sample			Weighted sample	
	Median	Mean	Frequency	Mean	Frequency
BGE	3.0	3.33	43	3.33	38
KJE	3.0	2.85	26	2.85	18
EDUTUS	3.0	3.04	25	3.04	6
BCE	3.0	3.00	2	3.00	6
METU	4.5	4.50	2	4.50	6
PE	3.0	3.00	3	3.00	9
PTE	3.0	3.00	1	3.00	3
NYE	3.0	3.00	1	3.00	3
DE	3.0	2.83	6	2.83	18
Other	4.0	4.00	1	4.00	3
Total	3.0	3.13	110	3.17	110

Based on the median values in Figure 4, there is essentially no considerable difference in the appearance of elements of transferable skills at the vast majority of institutions, with the exception of one (METU). Regarding the results of the raw sample, based on the Kruskal–Wallis-test [$\chi^2(9, N = 110) = 9.33$, $p = 0.407$] there is no significant difference between the institutions. In the case of the weighted sample, however, the difference is already significant [$\chi^2 = 21.693$; $p = 0.006$].

In higher education, many teaching and learning methods/forms are used to convey knowledge, some of which can also be used to develop transferable skills. Accordingly, the following relationship can be demonstrated between the methods/forms applied during programme (question 16) and the appearance of transferable skills elements (question 13).

[10]The table includes average values in addition to medians, because this allows any differences between the ratings given by congruent and incongruent groups to be better displayed and compared.

Figure 5 — Rank correlation analysis (based on answers to questions 13 and 16)

Elements of transferable skills / Teaching and learning methods/forms	Rank correlation coefficient value	Confidence interval and significance level
Teacher's lecture	r_s=0.001	[-0.186; 0.189] p=0.988
Student presentation	r_s=0.332	[0.154; 0.489] p<0.001
Teamwork	r_s=0.364	[0.190; 0.516] p<0.001
Guest speakers	r_s=0.316	[0.137; 0.475] p<0.001
Project-based learning	r_s=0.345	[0.169; 0.500] p<0.001
Problem-based learning	r_s=0.455	[0.293; 0.592] p<0.001
Inquiry-based learning	r_s=0.393	[0.222; 0.540] p<0.001
Internship	r_s=0.143	[-0.045; 0.322] p=0.136

According to the graduates involved in the research, the teacher's lecture played the greatest role in the programme, but it had the least impact on transferable skills, with no significant relationship between the two (r_s=0.001; p=0.988).

Following the transition to Bachelor system, the duration of professional internship in the tourism and catering programme was reduced from two to one semester[11], and in the tourism management master's program, there is no internship at all. Partly for this reason, graduates did not consider professional internship to be sufficiently emphasized in the programme, so its impact is minimal in terms of transferable skills; similarly to teacher presentations, there is no significant relationship between the two variables (r_s=0.143; p=0.136). A weaker than average or moderately significant relationship can be demonstrated for all other methods that help transfer skills and transferable skills elements. The two strongest relationships were between the appearance of transferable skills elements and problem-based as well as inquiry-based learning (r_s=0.455; r_s=0.393). The two methods are relatively close to each other, which can greatly contribute to the development of problem-solving and collaboration skills. In addition, the role of teamwork and project-based learning is increasingly valued in programme.

The HEGESCO (2009) research examined the relationship between specific and general competencies by interviewing representatives of Hungarian higher education institutions. Based on the interviews (in their opinion of only three interviewees) both competencies were considered equally important in Hungary. All this is basically consistent with the evaluation of students in the field of tourism and catering in this research, the narrow majority of whom (51%) considered the level of transferable skills acquired during their studies to be the same as job-specific skills. However, a still quite significant proportion of graduates (44%) believe that the level of transferable skills is weaker than job-specific skills.

[11]Two-thirds of the graduates in the sample had already continued their undergraduate studies in the multi-cycle programme, which required a semester-long internship. The research was not affected, but from 2020 the internship period in the tourism and catering undergraduate programme increased to two semesters.

Connecting higher education and the labour market

In addition to job-specific skills, the appearance of transferable (general) skills in programme also raises the question of its usability in work. Half of the graduates involved in the research were able to utilize their job-specific skills to a small or medium, while the majority were able to utilize their transferable skills to a large or very large extent in their work. If we examine the relationship between the variables, a weaker than average (r_s=0.328), significant (p<0.001; [0.146; 0.489]) relationship can be demonstrated between the appearance of transferable skills and the utilization of job-specific skills. In the case of the utilization of transferable skills, the relationship between the two is already of medium strength (r_s=0.494) and is also significant (p<0.001; [0.334; 0.627]).

Figure 6 — Utilization of knowledge acquired in programme in terms of educational match/mismatch

N=105		Vertical		Horizontal	
		matching/ congruent	mismatching/ incongruent	matching/ congruent	mismatching/ incongruent
Utilization of professional (job-specific) skills	Median	3.0	2.0	3.5	2.0
	Mean	2.95	2.51	3.35	1.93
Utilization of transferable (general) skills	Median	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0
	Mean	3.60	3.60	3.73	3.42

Figure 6 shows that the utilization of job-specific (professional) and transferable (general) skills is different among those who are employed in matching (congruent) and mismatching (incongruent) ways. The utilization of job-specific skills is lower in both the vertically incongruent and horizontally incongruent groups than among those employed in a congruent manner, however, the difference between the horizontally incongruent and congruent groups is significant (p<0.001) based on the Mann-Whitney test. This is understandable, as horizontal mismatch means that the job title and the graduates' professional qualifications are separated. The utilization of transferable skills was rated highly by respondents regardless of the type of match/mismatch (vertical, horizontal), and there was no significant difference between the congruent and incongruent groups (p=0.756); (p=0.162). Consequently, transferable skills can be utilized well in both educational match and mismatch, but its role is especially enhanced in the case of horizontal mismatch due to the lower level of utilization of job-specific skills.

In the international research (HEGESCO, 2009) conducted with the participation of Hungarian graduates, the utilization of knowledge/skills was examined in addition to educational mismatch. Based on the results, about a third (29%) of graduates were unable to properly utilize their knowledge in their work. In this research, the utilization of knowledge appeared from the perspective of job-specific (professional) skills on the one hand, and transferable (general competencies) skills on the other. In the case of the former, nearly half of the graduates (46%) were not able to utilize their job-specific skills at work at all or only to a small extent. For the latter, this ratio was only 17%. The result of the international research examining the utilization of knowledge together is therefore between the two, that is, it can be interpreted as its average value.

Before and after the Covid-19 pandemic

Some of the respondents in the research worked in a different job before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020) than at the time of the survey. In terms of educational match/mismatch, we compared graduates who had jobs in both periods but worked in different jobs.

Figure 7 — Ratio of educational match/mismatch based on changed job title before and after the Covid-19 pandemic

		Before the Covid-19 pandemic (N=31)		After the Covid-19 pandemic (N=31)	
Vertical match		35% (N=11)		52% (N=16)	
Vertical mismatch		65% (N=20)		48% (N=15)	
Undereducation	Overeducation	5% (N=1)	95% (N=19)	13% (N=2)	87% (N=13)
Horizontal match		61% (N=19)		55% (N=17)	
Horizontal mismatch		39% (N=12)		45% (N=14)	
Vertical and horizontal match		26% (N=8)		29% (N=9)	
Vertical and horizontal mismatch		29% (N=9)		23% (N=7)	
Mixed match/mismatch		45% (N=14)		48% (N=15)	

About a third (31 persons) of the graduates (105 persons) who had jobs at the time of the survey were working in other jobs before the pandemic. Before the pandemic, the majority of graduates worked in jobs that were not appropriate to their level of education (typically lower than their level of education), while after the pandemic, the ratio of those working in vertically matched/congruent and mismatched/incongruent jobs became more balanced. In comparison, the proportion of graduates working in jobs outside their field of education (horizontally mismatched/incongruent) has increased slightly since the pandemic. After the pandemic, those employed in mismatched/incongruent roles were placed in jobs in sales, administration, HR, and IT, among others.

The use of job-specific (professional) and transferable (general) skills can also be examined among graduates who worked in other jobs before the Covid-19 pandemic, depending on whether they were employed in a match/congruent or a mismatch/incongruent manner.

Figure 8 — Utilization of knowledge/skills acquired in programme according to educational match/mismatch (in the case of work before the Covid-19 pandemic)

N=34		Vertical		Horizontal	
		matching/ congruent	mismatching/ incongruent	matching/ congruent	mismatching/ incongruent
Utilization of professional (job-specific) skills	Median	4.0	2.0	4.0	2.0
	Mean	3.23	2.52	3.3	2.07
Utilization of transferable (general) skills	Median	3.0	4.0	3.5	4.0
	Mean	3.21	3.52	3.3	3.64

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, those employed in a different job and vertically mismatched/incongruent were less able to use professional (job-specific) skills in their work than the matching/congruent group. This difference is not significant according to the Mann-Whitney test (p=0.146), but it is significant for the horizontally matching/congruent and mismatching/incongruent groups (p=0.013). In the utilization of transferable skills, the difference is reversed, i.e., graduates who were placed in an incongruent manner were able to utilize the general competencies acquired during their programme to a greater extent; however, the difference between the two groups is not significant either vertically (p=0.541) or horizontally (p=0.498).

If we compare the evaluations of graduates working in different jobs before the pandemic and those employed at the time of the study, the results are very similar. In both cases, transferable skills can be utilized in work, regardless of congruent or incongruent employment, especially when the usefulness of professional (job-specific) skills is less evident in incongruent employment.

Conclusions and future research directions

The labour shortage, which has become a general phenomenon over the last decade, and the growing trend of educational mismatch, pose a serious challenge to both higher education institutions and employers. In addition to job-specific (professional) skills, transferable (general) skills also play an increasingly important role in graduate employment. Based on the research results, it can be stated that, on the one hand, the use of certain learning methods is more conducive to the acquisition of transferable skills elements, while others are less effective, and on the other hand, transferable skills can be utilized very well not only in incongruent but also in congruent employment.

The results of this research can contribute to rethinking the balance between job-specific and transferable skills in higher education institutions to better align with labour-market needs. A higher proportion of transferable skills could also improve graduates' employability in some fields of tourism, particularly in accommodation services and travel management. In addition, the application of educational methods related to work-integrated learning – in particular inquiry- and problem-based learning, as well as project-based learning – in higher education can further facilitate the acquisition of transferable skills (e.g., problem-solving, critical thinking, teamwork, self-management).

Compared to traditional questionnaires, which we also conducted, online data sources offer an alternative or complementary analytical option for examining educational match/mismatch. Both employers and employees are present on various job portals. Employers publish job advertisements, which include qualification expectations and competency requirements (job-specific and transferable skills). The CV-s uploaded by potential employees also contain useful information. In addition, the employer's expectations published on social media and the available employee profiles can also be investigated. However, access to data from such sources is often limited, and the sample is typically not representative. The latter problem can be treated with weighting.

The match between the degree and the job requirements can be examined not only in terms of the employee's level of education but also their skills. This is the so-called skill mismatch, which does not necessarily coincide with educational mismatch. All of this can occur even with the over- or underqualification that we examined; therefore, in later research, the match/mismatch in education and ability can be examined together, with special emphasis on the usability of job-specific and transferable skills.

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Career Guidance in the Central and South-Eastern European Region: The case of four countries via the lenses of non-governmental organisations

Introduction

The perception of career guidance and the opportunities for career guidance practitioners to participate in shaping career guidance systems depend on the development of career guidance within each country's context and political culture. Although some countries in Europe are geopolitically connected, their different histories create specific differences in career guidance systems and their development. On the other hand, the trend to harmonise the development of career guidance across EU countries continues (Council of the European Union, 2004, 2008; ETF, 2003), with some countries deliberately joining forces to address common themes or issues (Andreassen, Einarsdóttir, Lerkkanen et al., 2019; Haug, Plant, Valdimarsdóttir et al., 2019; Borbély-Pecze, Hloušková, & Šprlák, 2022).

It is no easy task to link EU-level education policy, social policy, and employment objectives, including career guidance policy, with Member State objectives, even more so to translate those policy goals into the societal domain in which civil associations are active. The European Semester itself is a complex and regularly implemented mechanism (Fromont & Van Waeyenberge, 2025). Understanding the career guidance objectives of this mechanism is a challenge for career guidance organisations operating in civil society.

Since its inception, the EU has been wrestling with a legitimacy deficit in decision-making, a consequence of its specific functioning. Some authors even argue that civil society organisations serve as a remedy to the legitimacy crisis (Kohler-Koch, 2009:50). In this way, by essentially extending citizen participation in EU decision-making, although there is a directly elected parliament, much of the decision-making remains in the hands of national governments. From the perspective of EU policy, one or more governing ministries in each country are responsible for setting policy priorities and strategies for the development of career guidance systems at various levels, but civil society organisations remain the messengers of democratic transformation in policy decision-making processes (Keane & Merkel, 2019).

In general, civil society organisations play a pivotal role in ensuring transparency in political decision-making and in shaping national policies. The variabilities in the involvement of civil society organisations representing the voice of career guidance practitioners (professional associations) in the development of national career guidance systems inspired four Central and Eastern countries (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania) to cooperate on a common theme – to strengthen the collaboration of the professional associations in the field of career guidance and education.

This study presents the initial results of research aimed at understanding and comparing the functioning of four professional associations of career guidance practitioners, which, as one of the stakeholders at the national level, have the potential to participate in policy decision-making on the development of career guidance in countries collaborating within the project entitled “Central and Eastern European Guidance Association Forum” (CEEGAF). The research design, based on joint work within the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN, 2012, 2015), consisted of three steps. First, an internal survey (an online questionnaire) was conducted among members of each professional association. Then, the association's management conducted an internal SWOT analysis of each professional association's functioning, and finally, interviews with stakeholders and focus groups were conducted to obtain an external perspective on the role of professional associations in each country.

Geopolitics

Until now, Central and Eastern Europe has lacked a professional platform or expert group for regularly discussing career guidance-related issues. Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic were more involved in the V4 (Visegrad Group) from 1991 until the early 2010s. Hungary was also active in the V4 and in the Balkan cooperation, where Romania is a regular participant. The former Central European Initiative (CEI) is a forum for regional cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe (including Italy and Ukraine) with 17 member states, founded in Budapest in 1989. It is currently operational; if it has an agenda, it is mainly focused on diplomatic affairs. A newer initiative, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (2011), is a macro-regional strategy for the Danube region, a long-term EU policy to address the problems of the Danube macro-region, which encompasses the states covered in this article, but does not actually include a trajectory for career guidance in the region.

The experience of connecting Central European countries in the field of career guidance dates back to the IAEVG (International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance) conference in Bratislava in 2019. In 2024, we established cooperation with Romania, which was the starting point for the founding of the Central and Eastern European Region Career Guidance Forum. The aim of the cooperation between these four countries (namely CZ: Czech Republic, HU: Hungary, RO: Romania and SK: Slovakia) in this forum and project is to promote the role of four civil society organisations dealing with career guidance (professional associations) in the development of career guidance within their countries, in the professional representation of career guidance practitioners and, not least, in the development of regional cooperation in the field of career guidance.

To get acquainted with the contemporary career guidance systems, services, and research of Romania, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, we can revisit the national career guidance system descriptions of the Cedefop CareersNet Network (Cedefop, 2000a, 2000b, 2023), then research reports written before accession (ETF, 2003), and some recent articles (Watts & Borbély-Pecze, 2011) as well. Nevertheless, until the start of our cooperation, the flow of professional information between the otherwise neighbouring and sometimes partially overlapping countries in terms of language was very incomplete, with perhaps the sole exception of Czech–Slovak professional relations. It is often the case that a Slovak or Romanian career guidance report or scientific article is only known to the Hungarian professional public through US, Canadian, British, German, or French media, or only through large international organisations (e.g., OECD, WB, ILO, ETF, etc.) and vice versa. At the same time, we know from several conferences (IAEVG, Career Lead Network, Euroguidance regional meetings, such as the Euroguidance Cross-Border Seminars (EG, 2024)), short descriptions of national systems (Cedefop CareersNet) or other Erasmus+-related ad hoc projects, that a lot of useful career guidance practices are emerging in these neighbouring countries, while we hardly know each other's good practices, and joint professional reflection is minimal.

Mapping the situation in the four countries

All four professional associations consider the development and promotion of career guidance/counselling/education, and the strengthening of the career guidance position in society, to be their fundamental mission. Their goal is also to provide professional support to career guidance practitioners

and develop a community for those working in the field of career guidance, regardless of the type and field of their degree. In addition, they also try to raise awareness of career guidance services among the public (especially CZ, SK) and to communicate the professional interests of the members to the governing ministries and other decision-makers (especially RO, HU). Based on the expert assessment of the authors of this text, the conditions for the career guidance policy decision-making participation of professional associations vary slightly in the context of each country (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 — Regional Comparison of the four countries' career guidance landscape

Country	**Status of the national Lifelong Guidance Strategy**	**Number of organizations associated with career guidance practitioners**	**National guidance forum** (NGF)
Hungary	Sectoral, fragmented	Two major NGOs in the field and others partly also focusing on career guidance, additional non-profit and for-profit associations in the field of HR and coaching	Was abolished in 2012
Czech Republic	Sectoral with coordination efforts	Three active NGOs in the field and other associations deal only marginally with specific issues of career guidance	It was established in 2010, and two of the three active NGOs are involved in the NGF
Slovakia	Sectoral, fragmented	One active NGO representing the interests of careers guidance practitioners, recognized as a partner of public bodies on an ad-hoc basis	No, historically 2 attempts (2008 and 2014-2015)
Romania	Sectoral, fragmented	Romanian Counselors Association	There is no NGF

A brief introduction to the four professional associations

- *HU: Magyar Pedagógiai Társaság (MPT) / Hungarian Pedagogical Society /Division for Career Education and Guidance.*

Since its foundation, the Career Guidance Division of the MPT has had a threefold mission, which was confirmed in the Statutes adopted in 2024: a) to support the professional development of career guidance counsellors, b) to develop the institutional framework for career guidance (labour services, schools, vocational training, primary and general secondary education, higher education, social inclusion, NGOs), and c) to develop policy proposals (Hungarian Pedagogical Association, 2024). The division has had its operational manual since 2024, signed by the membership. The division elects its own leadership and delegates its electoral power at the association level. The operating model is based on grassroots democracy.

- *CZ: Sdružení pro kariérové poradenství a kariérový rozvoj (SKPKR) / Association for Career Guidance and Career Development*

The vision of the Association is to provide a space for mutual learning, sharing of experience, and inspiration to support the professional development of career counsellors and thus contribute to the availability of quality career counselling in the Czech Republic. A member of the association can be a person with a professional relationship or who shows an active interest in career guidance/counselling and career development. The Association is managed by a five-member board. Each member of the board acts independently on behalf of the Association (Sdružení, 2017: Sections 3, 4, 6, 8).

- *SK: Združenie pre kariérové poradenstvo a rozvoj kariéry (ZKPKR) / Association for Career Guidance and Career Development)*

The association pursues the following objectives: bringing together, cooperating with, and networking career guidance experts; supporting professional development and training of experts; making career guidance and counselling services available; and promoting the interests of career guidance and career development. It associates legal entities and individuals. The highest body of the association is the General Assembly of all members. The Association's activities are managed by a five-member board (Združenie, 2017: Section 2, 3, 6, 7).

- *RO: Asociația Consilierilor Romani (ACROM) / Romanian Counsellors Association*

The Romanian Counsellors Association[1] promotes the counselling profession and supports the professional development of those involved in career guidance and counselling activities at the national level. ACROM provides a framework for collaboration, the exchange of best practices, and continuous training, with the aim of improving the quality of counselling services in Romania. The organisation supports national and international initiatives in the field and aims to contribute to the development of a coherent legal framework adapted to the realities of society. Its activities include cooperation with relevant institutions, the organisation of educational programmes, and the representation of professional interests in dialogue with public authorities. ACROM organises annual conferences dedicated to counsellors from both higher and pre-university education sectors, with consistent participation ranging from 100 to 200 attendees per edition. The association is managed by a five-member board, elected by vote, which provides strategic direction and oversees day-to-day operations.

These four professional associations have typically been operating for about ten years or a little bit more and have a membership of 30–60 people from very different branches of career guidance, including schools' career educators/teachers, public employment services, VET, universities, non-governmental organisations, and private career coaches, as well as university academic staff. It is important to emphasise that three of the four professional associations are relatively small in their own country and deal exclusively with the development and representation of the interests of career guidance practitioners. The fourth organisation in Hungary is also a non-governmental organisation, with 1,200 members and nearly 30 divisions across all areas of pedagogy, including career guidance and education. This career guidance division (a partner involved in the CEEGAF project) is comparable to the other three organisations in terms of its number of members (see Figure 2).

Methodology

Based on the description of professional associations in four cooperating countries, it can be assumed that the roles of professional associations in shaping and developing national guidance systems vary. Therefore, the research aimed to understand and compare the perceived roles of four professional associations in shaping the national policies and practices of career guidance. For these purposes, the research was designed to capture both the "inside" perspective of the members and management of each professional association (INTERNAL view) and the "outside" perspective of other stakeholders in each country (EXTERNAL view). In the internal view, we were interested in how professional associations meet the needs and expectations of their members and how their leadership reflects the functioning and management of these organizations. From an external perspective, we explored how different stakeholders involved in career guidance and counselling interpret the importance of career guidance in their country and the role they believe professional associations that bring together career guidance practitioners play in this context. The combination of internal and external perspectives will enable us to describe the roles of professional associations in shaping and developing national guidance systems. The research was conducted between November 2024 and April 2025, and it can be divided into three consecutive steps, each of which is described separately.

[1] https://acrom.org.ro/

First research step – online membership questionnaire

A survey of members' opinions on the functioning of their association was conducted using the following research questions:

- What do members of the four small professional associations with nationwide coverage (CZ, HU, RO, SK) operating in the field of career guidance expect from their membership?
- How do national associations meet the expectations of their members?
- How does the leadership of these professional associations evaluate their performance in relation to their members?

We used several tools to answer these research questions. The views and opinions of association members were collected through an online questionnaire that was based on the statutes of professional associations (Sdružení, 2017; Združenie, 2017, HPA, 2024). The questionnaire specified 11 areas of activity (Tab. 3) that can be considered as general goals for fulfilling the mission of career guidance associations. Respondents rated these 11 areas on a six-point scale from two perspectives:

- Fulfilment: how their association fulfils the given activity, scale: 1: does not fulfil at all, 6: fulfils it fully.
- Importance: how important they consider the given activity to be among the association's activities; scale: 1 = not important at all, 6 = crucial importance.

To compare the ratings of individual associations, we used a weighted arithmetic mean, assigning 6 points to a score of 6, 1 point to a score of 1, etc. The answer "I don't know" receives 0 points.

Sampling

The members' questionnaire was emailed to all members (337 individuals) in the first few months of 2025, with 20.5% responding (Figure 2). The Slovak association has the largest number of members among the four associations surveyed. On the other hand, the Czech association has the fewest members and respondents.

Figure 2 — Overview of addressed members and respondents

Country[1]	Number of addressed members	Number of respondents	% of return
SK	200	27	13,5
CZ	36	10	27,8
RO	48	20	41,6
HU	53	12	22,6
Total	**337**	**70**	**20,5**

In the next step of the internal survey, we developed a self-assessment tool to get a better understanding of the leadership of the four associations and their roles, objectives, ways of communicating with their own membership base and external stakeholders such as relevant government agencies/ ministries, other civil society organizations, universities, and most importantly with the membership base and non-member career counsellors. The opinion of the associations' leadership was examined by the same self-assessment matrix (SWOT) created for each organisation. We were interested in what respondents saw as the main benefit of their association membership. This question was answered by 45 respondents (63.4%). The most valued benefits include professional growth, networking, access to relevant information, and a sense of community. However, there's also a clear call for more consistent communication, recognition of contributions, and enhanced visibility of the association’s impact: both for members and the broader professional field.

Results of the membership questionnaire[2]

The highest questionnaire return rate was for the Romanian association (Figure 2). Among the respondents, there are slightly more members with a membership period (Figure 3) longer than three years (53%) than members with a membership period of up to three years (47%).

Figure 3 — Length of respondentsmembership

Membership length	CZ	HU	RO	SK	Total
less than 1 year	1	2	0	7	10
1-3 years	1	4	5	12	23
3-5 years	1	2	5	3	11
more than 5 years	8	4	10	4	26
Total	**11**	**12**	**20**	**27**	**70**

Most respondents consider themselves to be passive members participating in association activities (55%). Slightly more than a quarter of respondents are actively involved in association activities (27%), and slightly fewer respondents (18%) consider themselves to be members actively participating in association life.

Respondents' views on 11 activities of their member associations.

Figure 4 shows that respondents rate all the activities offered as important (average ratings ranging from 4.73 to 5.64). Among the three most important association activities, respondents mentioned “Sharing information and promoting innovation, new trends, new tools, approaches and topics in career guidance” (5.64 points), “Supporting networking and facilitating collaboration among career professionals” (5.61 points), and “Providing informal training opportunities (workshops, webinars, trainings, mobilities, study visits, job shadowing)” (5.5 points).

Of the 11 association activities (Figure 4) offered in the questionnaire, the three highest-rated activities that our respondents believe their member associations fulfilled include: “Sharing information and promoting innovations, new trends, new tools, approaches and topics in career counselling” (4.24 points), “Providing informal learning opportunities (workshops, webinars, training, motivation, study visits, job shadowing)” (4.04 points), and “Supporting networking and facilitating collaboration among career professionals” (3.94 points).

It follows from the above that all associations meet their members' expectations and fulfil one of their key goals as stated in their statutes.

[2]A detailed report was made on the membership questionnaire survey and this part of the article is written based on this report from Freibergová & Hloušková (2025).

Figure 4 — Gap score from comparison of respondents' opinions on the fulfilment and importance

No.	Activity	Average fulfillment	Average importance	Gap score
7	Participating in research and development projects (e.g., Erasmus+ projects, nationally funded projects ...)	3,9	4,8	0,87
2	Sharing information and promoting innovation, new trends, new tools, approaches, and topics in career guidance	4,2	5,6	1,40
8	Promoting career guidance and career guidance providers	3,8	5,2	1,44
3	Providing informal training opportunities (workshops, webinars, trainings, motilities, study visits, job shadowing)	4,0	5,5	1,46
9	Helping practitioners implement policies into practice (information/training about new legislation, norms ...)	3,6	5,1	1,51
6	Supporting high-quality service delivery (e.g., through ethical standards, professional guidelines ...)	3,6	5,1	1,56
10	Shaping guidance provision on the regional level (communicating with regional authorities ...)	3,1	4,7	1,59
1	Supporting networking and facilitating collaboration among career professionals	3,9	5,6	1,67
5	Providing accreditation/certification of career professionals (e.g., accredited training, recognition and/or validation ...)	3,0	4,8	1,71
11	Shaping guidance system on the national level (advocacy, participating in legislative process, communicating with ministries ...)	3,2	5,1	1,89
4	Providing supervision, intervision, and mentoring	2,9	4,8	1,93

By comparing respondents' opinions on the fulfilment of the 11 activities and their importance in association life, we gain an overview of which activities respondents consider important in association life and to what extent they are fulfilled. The "Gap score" (the difference between the achieved average importance and fulfilment of activities) reaches values from 0.87 to 1.93 points (Table 4).

In our opinion, associations should pay particular attention to those activities for which respondents indicated high importance (>5), low fulfilment (<3.5), and therefore high "gap scores" (>1.3). In the next part of this text, we focus on three activities with high deficiency scores, namely:

- supporting networking and facilitating collaboration among career professionals;
- providing supervision, intervision, and mentoring;
- shaping the guidance system on the national level (advocacy, participating in the legislative process, communicating with ministries …).

Supporting networking and facilitating collaboration among career professionals (Chart no 1) can be considered as one of the basic functions of each association. The fulfilment of this activity is evaluated as excellent by Romanian (54%), Slovak (38%), and Hungarian (8%) respondents. On average, Romanians awarded this activity 4.3 points, slightly less than Slovaks (4.1 points), Hungarians (3.9 points), and Czechs (3.2 points).

Figure 5 — Fulfillment of supporting networking and facilitating collaboration among career professionals

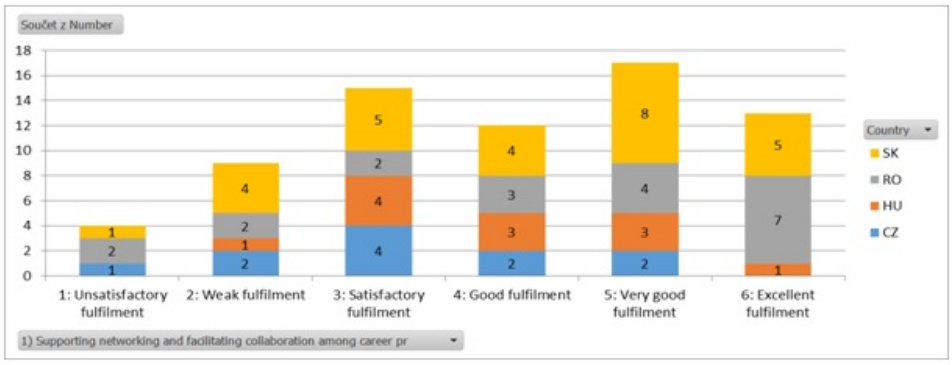
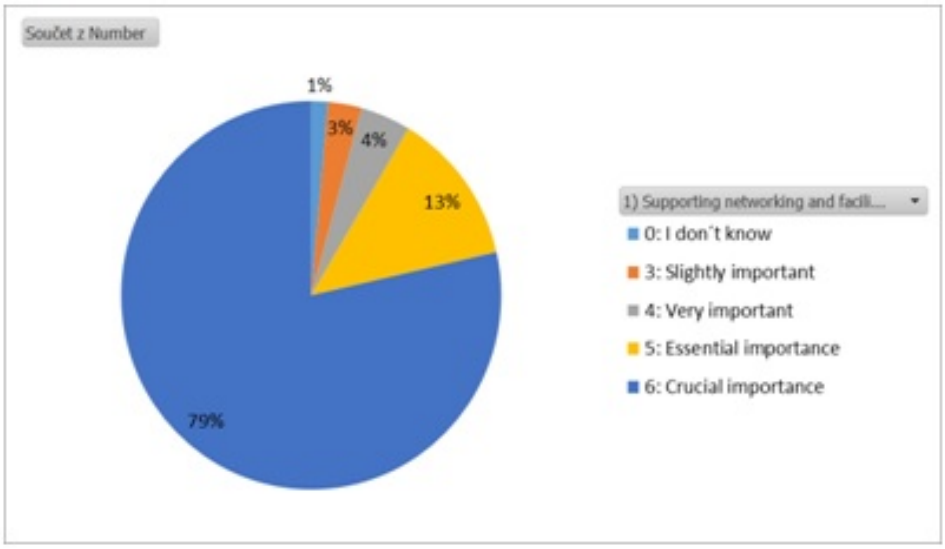


Figure 6 — Importance of supporting networking and facilitating collaboration among career professionals

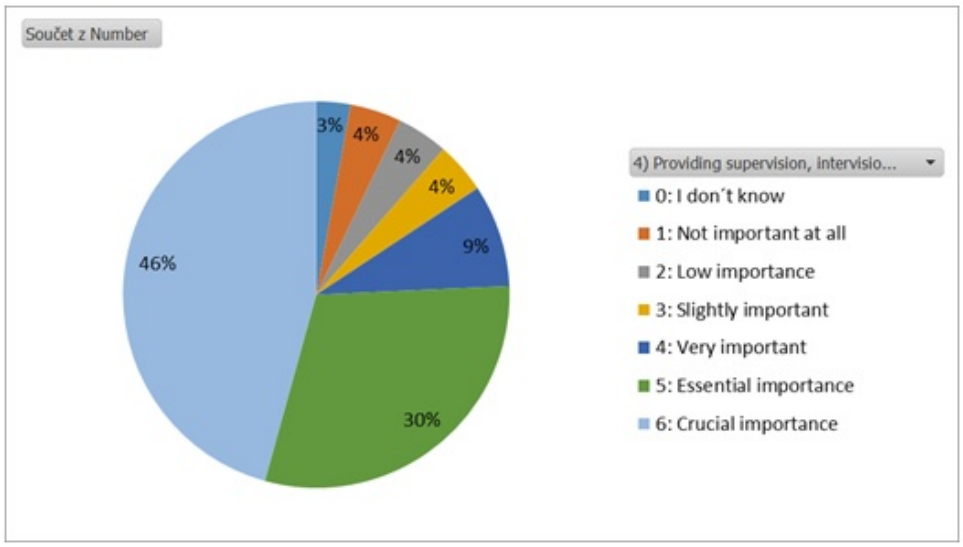


Most respondents, regardless of country of origin, unanimously consider supporting networking and facilitating collaboration (Chart No. 2) to be crucial (79%) and essential (13%), underscoring the importance of networking and fostering collaboration among career guidance practitioners. The respondents' answers show that larger associations are more successful at fostering networking and collaboration. This is one of the most important activities that is performed in a less-than-satisfactory manner, according to Czech members of their association.

On average, respondents evaluate the fulfilment of **supervision, intervision, and mentoring** (Chart No. 3) as slightly less than satisfactory, with an average score of 2.91. Provision of these activities is rated worst by Czechs (2.27 points), slightly better by Hungarians (2.67 points) and Slovaks (2.7 points), and best by Romanians, between satisfactory and good (3.7 points).

Figure 7 — Fulfillment of providing supervision, intervision, and mentoring

Figure 8 — Importance of providing supervision, intervision, and mentoring



The importance of providing supervision, intervision, and mentoring (Figure 8) is evaluated quite positively. Less than half of respondents consider it crucial (46%), essential (30%), or very important (9%). Slightly, low, and not important, each contribute 12%. The category "I don't know" also appears here (3%).

All associations declare their support for the professional development of their members, but the question is who should fulfil the need for supervision, intervision, and mentoring. The members of the association themselves? This activity is closely related to the presence or absence of a professional development system for career guidance practitioners in each country. If such a system does not exist (e.g., in the Czech Republic or Hungary), these activities can be carried out by experienced members of the association.

The last activity of the associations we will focus on is **shaping the guidance system on the national level** (Chart No. 5). On average, fulfilment of shaping the guidance system on the national level (advocacy, participating in the legislative process, communicating with ministries …) is rated as good by respondents from Romania (4.16 points) and Slovakia (4 points). Hungarian respondents awarded fulfilment of this activity 3.64 points, which corresponds to a rating between ‘excellent’ and ‘very good’ on the evaluation scale, Romanians 4.3 points, Slovaks 4.2 points (both between satisfactory and good), and the Czechs 2.89 points (a bit less than satisfactory). The low rating of the fulfilment of this activity by members of the Czech association is probably reflected in the fragmentation of the association's representation by all members of the association board (see Statutes, 2017, section).

Figure 9 — Fulfillment of shaping guidance system on the national level (advocacy, participating in legislative process, communicating with ministries …)

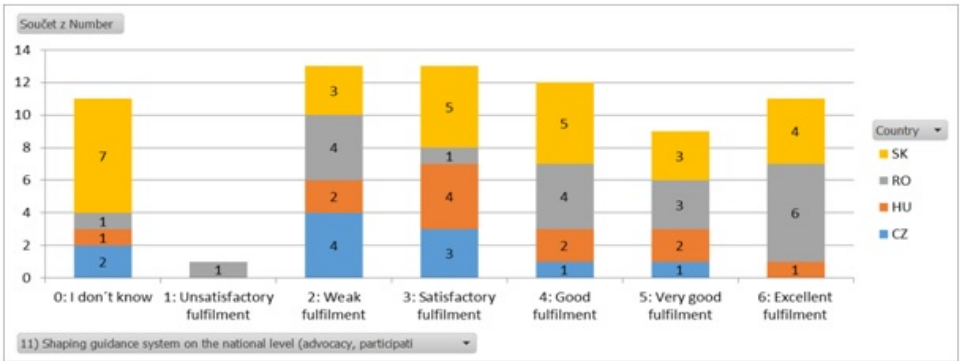
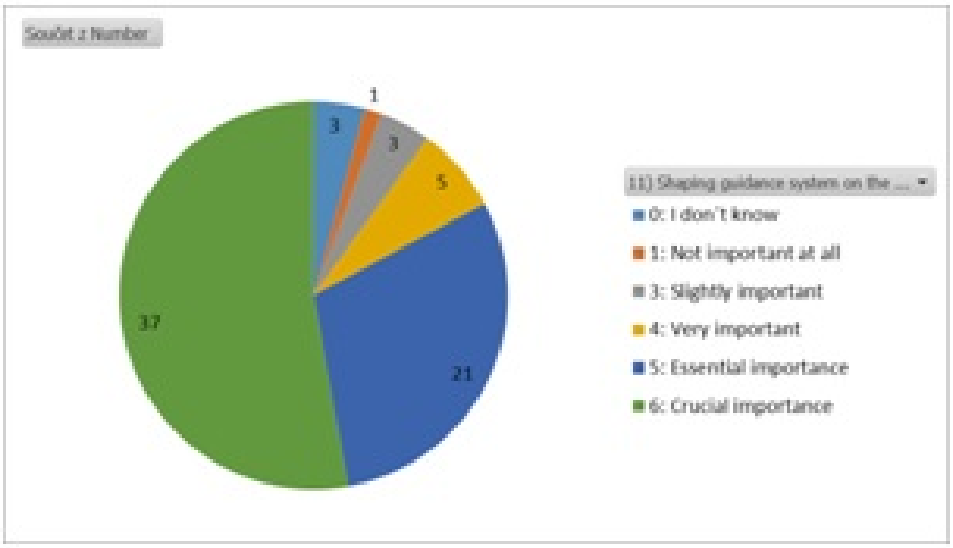


Figure 10 — Importance of shaping guidance system on the national level (advocacy, participating in legislative process, communicating with ministries …)



The importance of this activity is rated as crucial (37%), essential (21%), and very important (5%). The rest make up only 6%, of which 3% are slightly important, 1% not important at all, and 3% did not answer or could not answer. If shaping the guidance system on the national level is not one of the key activities of the association (e.g., in the Czech Republic or in Hungary), it may not be perceived as important by the members – respondents, and, understandably, the members may not perceive it as fulfilled either.

Second research step: view of the associations' management

As the next research step, we developed a self-assessment tool to get a better understanding of the four-association management and their roles, aims, ways of communication with their own membership and external stakeholders such as the relevant government agencies/ministries, other civil organisations, universities, and, most importantly, with the membership and the non-member career counsellors. To contextualise the membership dynamics, the Figure 11 below summarises the available numerical data as of November 2024.

Figure 11 — Composition of the associations' membership

Association (country)	Type of Members	Total Members	Notes
MPT (HU)	Individuals (Section)	45 (from 1200 total)	Section embedded in a larger pedagogical body
SKPKR (CZ)	Individuals	36	14 members paid their membership fee in 2024
ZKPRK (SK)	Individuals & Institutions	230	35 members paid their membership fee in 2024, 16 members are institutions (private guidance providers)
ACROM (RO)	Individuals & Institutions	100	2 institutional members

Despite differences in size, resources, and institutional context, these associations share a commitment to raising the quality of career guidance services, supporting professionals in the field, and advocating for stronger public policies.

Most associations are structured around voluntary engagement, with limited or no permanent staff, and rely heavily on the dedication of a small group of active members. While this speaks to strong professional motivation, it also presents sustainability challenges, particularly when managing administrative tasks or scaling up activities. Membership bases vary in size and financial contribution, with several associations noting difficulties in converting passive or informal members into active, fee-paying contributors.

Service delivery typically includes events (webinars, workshops, conferences), resource sharing, and participation in national or EU-funded projects. All associations share the aim of raising the quality of career guidance, influencing public policy, and supporting professionals. There are a few elements of a culture of planning and periodic review; associations generally adopt opportunistic planning models, driven by available project funding or institutional invitations rather than long-term strategic roadmaps. Associations do not have systems in place to gather regular feedback or to adjust services based on member needs.

In terms of public visibility and policy influence, associations face varying degrees of access to decision-making spaces. Some are well-integrated in national policy processes, while others remain peripheral. International cooperation, especially through Erasmus+ projects, is valued by all but is sometimes constrained by language barriers, limited administrative capacity, or a lack of co-funding.

While each association operates in a unique context, they face similar challenges, such as limited staffing, fluctuating member engagement, absence of long-term planning, and the fragility of volunteer-based operations. A shift toward more sustainable, planned, and member-driven operations would increase their overall impact.

Third research step: interviews with decision makers and focus groups with various stakeholders

Between the autumn of 2024 and the spring of 2025, we conducted a total of 13 interviews (2 HU, 4 RO, 3 SK, 4 CZ) and 7 focus groups (1 HU/6 participants, 2 RO/14 participants, SK/14 participants, 2 CZ/16 participants) in the four countries. Scenarios for interviews and focus groups were developed to explore the social and policy space surrounding NGOs and to better understand the economic, social, and institutional expectations related to career education and guidance.

Interviews and focus groups in Hungary

Two interviews were conducted in Hungary. One was with the head of the National Educational Authority responsible for public education career guidance, and the other was with the career guidance officer of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. (The Chamber provides career guidance services for students in vocational education and training and, to a lesser extent, for students in vocational training.) In both areas, career guidance primarily means helping with further education by providing career information, rather than providing career education. The Educational Authority supports these with further education information and self-knowledge questionnaires through the Authority's professional service advisory system. At the same time, the tools that support students' decisions are often regarded as professionally unreliable. The Chamber regrets that its activities are primarily limited to primary schools, after which secondary schools and universities are often closed, but there are examples of this cooperation in some counties. Two of our interviewees considered it as a problem of capacity.

Career guidance activities in schools are considered insufficient, often leading to erroneous decisions about further education. According to the head of the National Educational Authority, the school is not sufficiently exploiting the available opportunities, in which the workload of teachers plays a major role. There is no coordination in the area. The National Educational Authority does not require cooperation, partly because it believes there is no comparable actor in its field and partly because it sees the prospects for cooperation in public administration as difficult. The school career orientation day gives both organizations a serious task: the Chamber's task is primarily to bring together companies and interested parties and to present the professional opportunities of vocational training.

The lesson from the focus groups is that representatives of different organizations had varying levels of knowledge about the implementation of career guidance in Hungary. They were not familiar with the career guidance activities implemented in the entire vertical of the education and employment systems, while others were only aware of the services provided in their own fields. The NGO delegate representing parents had no systematic knowledge; he had only gained experience with domestic solutions through his own children, which led him to gain various experiences. Due to the composition of the group, the participants were mainly familiar with the services provided in education, but other services, such as those provided by the labour organisation and civil society organisations, as well as career counselling functions in the corporate environment, as well as the role of advocacy organisations (e.g., chambers), were also discussed.

In Hungary, NGOs have limited opportunities to collaborate with educational institutions at different levels in the field of career guidance due to the legal framework. NGOs can support the acquisition of work experience through volunteer activities or internship programs. The bigger problem, however, is that there are not enough professionals in NGOs (and in education) either; they are often absorbed by multinational companies with better existential opportunities, so the capacity of NGOs in this regard is also very limited.

NGOs can play a major role in preparing and motivating students, as they can attract young people's attention with non-traditional methods and tools and make the information needed for career decisions available to them.

Interviews and focus groups in Czechia

Four experts representing a wide range of stakeholder groups participated in the interviews: an academic teaching on the bachelor's degree programme "Career Guidance and Education", a senior member of staff from the Confederation of Industry and Transport, a private career counsellor, and a member of staff from the Regional Authority of the Pilsner Region, Department of Education, Youth and Sport (the regional directly managed organisation providing career guidance and career education).

Respondents perceive career guidance as an important tool for lifelong learning and adaptation to labour market changes. They state that, although its importance is growing, its systemic support

remains incomplete and uncoordinated. There is a lack of a legislative framework, stable funding, and anchoring in education and employment policy. Respondents believe that a sustainable way of financing career guidance must also be found for the future, as it is mainly dependent on project-based resources (e.g., ESF), which prevents its long-term planning and development. Career guidance is often neglected or given a marginal role in strategic documents. In addition to the absence of a legal framework, respondents point to the dysfunctionality of the National Guidance Forum (NPF), which lacks real influence on decision-making and policy coordination. Respondents state that the positive impacts of career guidance are mostly the result of local initiatives and individual efforts rather than systematic state support. The system lacks strategic unity, central management, and linkage to government policies. Respondents call for stronger formal support and better coordination between ministries, regions, and professional platforms. NGOs are perceived as important but complementary partners, especially in working with vulnerable groups and in areas where the state is failing. Their effective involvement in strategic structures (e.g., NPF) is conditional on their expertise, non-political nature, and a functional framework for cooperation.

Three main external factors hindering cooperation emerged from the final discussion: (1) lack of systemic anchoring, (2) low institutional capacity for partnerships, and (3) lack of legislative and financial support for the counselling profession.

Two focus groups were conducted in the Czech Republic, one face-to-face (20.11.2024) and one online (28.3.2025), with a total participation of 16 stakeholder representatives including 6 people from regional educational and counselling centres, 4 from schools (1 primary school, 2 secondary schools, 1 vocational school), 1 Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 1 Czech-Moravian Confederation of Trade Unions, 1 self-employed person, 1 company, 1 sports club, and 1 charity organization.

The focus group participants agreed that current career guidance in the Czech Republic suffers from significant fragmentation and the absence of a clear legislative framework. Career guidance is provided across various sectors and institutions, lacking a unified definition, consistent quality standards, and systemic interconnection. This means that individual providers and clients often do not know what to expect from career guidance, what its goals are, or who is responsible for it. A strong need to create a unified framework was communicated that would clearly define the profession and unify expectations and practices across sectors.

Participants were very critical of the issue of qualifications in career guidance. Although there is a possibility to obtain a professional qualification in career counselling through the National Register of Qualifications (2025), in practice, it is not required by employers and is not supported by legislation. This leads to confusion about the profession's very concept, professional activities, and differences in the quality of career guidance and counselling services. Similarly, methodological support for career guidance professionals is haphazard and dependent on ongoing projects.

Some initiatives of regional groups were positively assessed as showing potential for development from below, but their impact at the national level is not yet evident. The discussion also revealed that without a strong professional association that would be able to promote the interests of most career counsellors and influence national policies, including legislation, no significant improvement in the situation can be expected. The ideal form of a professional association, according to participants, is a representative and professional stakeholder that sets standards, ensures service quality, promotes further education, and engages in dialogue with the government and the public.

Interviews and focus groups in Slovakia

Three interviews were conducted, with representatives from the employers' association, public employment services (UPSVaR), and the Ministry of Education. They all shared the view that career guidance is increasingly central to meeting the challenges of a changing labour market. The employer representative emphasized a more pragmatic vision, focusing on practical outcomes of guidance in terms of

placement/alignment with the needs of the labour market, and criticized the efficiency of the current provision in this regard. Public employment services echoed this need for relevance, highlighting their focus on developing career management skills (CMS), especially among disadvantaged and long-term unemployed groups. From the Ministry's perspective, career guidance is essential for lifelong learning and for supporting people during career transitions.

While the association is widely recognized and respected, it is seen as a club of enthusiasts, but could have a more systematic approach to develop a systemic influence. Stakeholders expected the association to act as a competence centre and a professional voice. The Ministry of Education appreciated the association's ability to combine theoretical knowledge and practical experience. Some see ZKPRK as a potential "translator" of international best practices into national implementation and policy or "innovator" in terms of bringing new currents in guidance to Slovakia (e.g., "green guidance").

Stakeholders suggested that ZKPRK increase its visibility and influence through evidence-based advocacy, structured communication with ministries, and stronger ties to labour market actors. Having more established mechanisms for rapid consultation would be helpful… currently, collaboration is too "ad hoc."

Participants in the Slovak focus groups—primarily practitioners, educators, and those new to the field—described career guidance as a deeply human and empowering process. They viewed it as helping individuals embrace change, rediscover strengths, and move toward meaningful futures. Guidance was often framed as both a personal anchor and a tool for transformation.

There was a clear expectation for the national association to serve as a professional hub: offering practical resources, training tailored to diverse client groups, and ongoing support, especially for newcomers. Participants highlighted the need for access to supervision, legal clarity, and guidance on navigating the early stages of a career in guidance. The idea of a well-defined "member zone" with curated materials, case studies, and peer learning was frequently mentioned. At the same time, several participants were unsure of the current benefits of membership, underscoring the need for a clearer value proposition.

The association was also seen as having an important voice in shaping policy and standards. Participants emphasized the need for stronger advocacy—ensuring that guidance professionals are included in working groups and policy consultations, and that the field is better connected across education and employment sectors. There was consensus that the association should take the lead in defining professional standards and communicating the value of the guidance profession to the wider public.

Interviews and focus groups in Romania

The qualitative research in Romania involved 4 career counsellors in individual interviews and 14 in 2 focus groups organised. Participants include professionals active in the secondary educational system (CJRAE), university education (COCC), research and policy makers (ISE), non-formal education and personal development private services (NGOs), private companies providing career counselling services, recruiters working in private companies, and university students. Career counsellors prioritize ideas related to this professional field of career counselling, as follows:

- The need for a learning community among counsellors is present in all counsellors who participated in the study, either in this form or as a proposal for training, learning, monitoring, and coaching programs; it is found in several forms of presentation, such as: cross-functional academic community, employers, parents, counsellors, counselling network; professional community, learning community.
- The second idea, in terms of frequency, is a longitudinal approach to career counselling and education, whether it is presented in this form or in forms such as integrating counselling into the academic path, orientation towards the labour market, or a career management process throughout life. The

third most frequently nominated idea is the need for an interactive, collaborative platform where career counsellors can exchange experiences and access tools and models of good practice.

- Similar in frequency is the idea that promotes/requests the need to standardize the career counselling process at various stages of personal development, from the early stages of children's participation in the educational process, to specialization for each stage of development, and the imposition of an optimal intervention under the umbrella of educational institutions in partnership with the private organizations involved. In the context of standardization, the following are also mentioned: the creation of an intervention standard, the certification of counsellors based primarily on long-term training, standardized work tools, and requirements for continuous professional training.
- The other ideas presented by career counsellors are around proposing concrete activities that could bring career counsellors together: national and international conferences – organization and promotion; complementary training courses – marketing, personal branding, planning, time management, etc.

Summary and discussion

A combination of internal (members and association management) and external perspectives (other stakeholders) showed that all four professional associations meet the professional development needs of their members, thereby seeking to strengthen the professional identity of career guidance practitioners and the professionalization of career guidance in their respective countries. However, members of these associations and other stakeholders expect professional associations to be centres of shared expertise that enable their representatives to participate in political decision-making. To this end, however, the members of these four professional associations lack professional certainty and a shared professionalism culture (Evans, 2008).

Professional associations play an irreplaceable role in supporting the professional development of career guidance practitioners, but “helping practitioners implement policies into practice” and “shaping the career guidance system on the national level” are weak points in their functioning. The questionnaire and other research tools indicate that, across all four countries, our respondents' main benefit of association membership is **supporting their professional development**. This support takes the form of informal learning, sharing, networking, collaboration, and intervision, as well as more formalised activities such as promoting high-quality service delivery (e.g., ethical standards, professional guidelines), providing accreditation or certification (e.g., accredited training, recognition, and/or validation), and offering supervision, intervision, and mentoring. However, these more formalised activities **face external barriers** specific to each country that associations are not always able to influence. In countries (e.g., the Czech Republic), there is no system for the education and training of career counsellors or for the professional development of career guidance practitioners that reflects the required level of professionalism. The continuous professional development of career guidance practitioners is a matter of individual responsibility of each practitioner, while members of professional associations can partially transfer this responsibility to “their” association (Hloušková, 2019).

Although professional associations play an irreplaceable role in supporting the professional development of career guidance practitioners, there is also a clear call for professional associations as a **professional but non-governmental community** that has an impact on members and other professionals from the wider professional perspectives. Supporting professional development in more formalised ways, such as promoting high-quality service delivery (e.g., through ethical standards, professional guidelines), providing accreditation/certification of career practitioners (e.g. accredited training, recognition and/or validation), or providing supervision, intervision, and mentoring, **faces external barriers** specific to each country that associations are not always able to influence.

Hungary used to be a forerunner in the region, and since the 2010s, it has lost its comparative advantage. The national career guidance system and practice have become even more segmented than

ever before; therefore, the role of small non-profit associations has become even more important to keep the concept of career/lifelong guidance alive and to support the daily professional activities of its members. Based on the knowledge of the different assessments we used in this research, the Hungarian association is on the right track, and its work has been appreciated by its members as well as different stakeholders.

The partial conclusions of this research show that there is still a need for reform of career guidance in public services (at the national level) in the **Czech Republic**, not only among the members of the professional association but also among other stakeholders. At the same time, these findings signal hope for progress in career guidance through cooperation within the professional community. But only a robust, well-established professional association representing the interests of career guidance practitioners can become a respected partner in transforming its fragmented career guidance landscape into a coherent, sustainable system.

Slovakia finds itself at a crossroads: career guidance is increasingly recognized as a crucial response to labour-market transformation, yet its system remains fragmented and reliant on ad hoc initiatives. Stakeholders highlighted the national association's credibility and potential as a competence centre, capable of bridging theory and practice, and translating international innovations into local policy and practice. It is moving from being perceived as a "club of enthusiasts" to a systemic actor shaping the national professional standard, but it needs to strengthen its advocacy role, develop structured channels of communication with ministries and employers, and expand its support for practitioners.

The diversity of activities performed by career guidance professionals, the diversity of their education and training, and the sectoral organization of employers of career guidance professionals reinforce the fragmentation of the professional community in all four countries.

The **Romanian** professional association seems to be succeeding in overcoming this fragmentation thanks to the concept of 'new professionalism' (Evetts, 2011), which is based on a shared form of expertise as a professional value. However, this is the limitation of this research, as its methodology does not allow for a more detailed explanation.

A combination of internal (members and association management) and external perspectives (other stakeholders) showed that all four professional associations meet the professional development needs of their members, thereby seeking to strengthen the professional identity of career guidance practitioners and the professionalization of career guidance in their respective countries. However, members of these associations and other stakeholders expect professional associations to be centres of shared expertise that enable their representatives to participate in political decision-making. To this end, however, the members of these four professional associations lack professional certainty and a shared professionalism culture (Evetts, 2011).

Added value of the associations

Many members highly value their associations, particularly for the support they provide in professional development through training sessions, conferences, and webinars. Associations also offer valuable opportunities to network with other career counsellors and field experts. Additionally, associations serve as essential sources of up-to-date, relevant information on trends, methodologies, and principles of career guidance. Another important aspect is the sense of belonging to a community of career counsellors and the shared values that membership fosters. These factors underscore the crucial role of associations as platforms for building professional communities, exchanging best practices, sharing information, and representing members' interests externally. However, the successful operation of associations depends on the active involvement of both their leadership and members.

Respondents frequently recommended organizing professional events more frequently, making them accessible not only at the national level but also within individual regions, beyond the scope of traditional annual conferences. They emphasized the need to create opportunities for peer-to-peer

exchanges and the sharing of best practices, such as through workshops, thematic discussions, and storytelling from practical experiences. Additionally, respondents suggested reviving successful event formats, such as summer and winter schools, as well as informal gatherings like "Coffee with a career counsellor," which encourage more relaxed and open discussions.

Other crucial topics include the accreditation of career counsellors, the establishment of clear ethical standards for the profession, and the strengthening of political and advocacy efforts at both national and regional levels. Ensuring quality regulation, recognition of the profession, and its influence on education and employment policy development are vital for the sustainable operation of career guidance.

To remain relevant and future-oriented, associations should strategically map membership and social needs, keep up with new social and technological trends, incorporate them into their operational plans and strategies, and ensure their effective implementation. This includes systematic engagement with their members and career guidance experts, organizing thematic conferences and workshops, developing specialized materials, and active collaboration with governmental and non-governmental organizations.

According to participants in the focus groups, organizations primarily play a role in providing professional information. Forums are important where representatives of different professions and organizations can share their experiences, and there is an opportunity to "learn from each other". Occasions and events can also be useful for getting to know who does what and which methods they use to "get into the picture" with the activities, opportunities, and available services. It is also important to provide an interface and a forum where professionals can learn from one another about best practices and tools. Organizations can play a potential role in exploring and publishing fundraising opportunities, as well as advocacy in the field.

Interviewees, as well as members of the career guidance NGOs, raised several urgent issues related to career guidance. Most of them indicated the lack of resources as the primary problem. The general experience is that career guidance is treated as an important area in the region, but not enough funds are allocated to it, and those funds are incidental and campaign-like. D***ue to the multi-stakeholder institutional system of career guidance, the systemic approach is lost.*** The focus is not on the citizen, but on the individual student, employee, or university student.

The interviewees considered it equally important to support the ***deeper integration of career guidance across different fields of education***, to encourage the acceptance of career guidance as a discipline and an independent profession, and to establish institutionalized forums for the sharing of best practices.

Fragmented institutional and policy systems, along with a lack of available, well-prepared professionals, are also a challenge. For all these reasons, it would be of paramount importance to increase the area's advocacy effect. The ***lack of clear regulation*** at the professional level, with developed and monitored quality standards, leads to the emergence of "opportunists" who seek to compensate for the shortage of specialists and offer career counselling services under various names.

Clearly, the ***EU concept*** (CoEU 2004, 2008 & ELGPN, 2015) of ***lifelong guidance (LLG) is well understood in the region among career guidance practitioners***. Most association members and external stakeholders understand this ***concept as umbrella terminology*** (e.g., Institute for Educational Sciences – individual interview in Romania). It was created to bring together the segmented elements of career guidance across different levels of the school system with labour-market-supporting services (e.g., career and employment counselling). Most professionals found that decision-makers, and often even teachers, social workers, and psychologists, do not understand the same concept of LLG as career counselling professionals do.

In some cases, even actors in related professions speak out in the face of professional contempt: "anyone can give advice" or "every teacher/social worker is a counsellor". Some psychologists, also

starting from strong market protection fears, directly initiate the exclusion of non-psychological counsellors from services. In other cases (e.g., in Hungary), the profession is "demoted" in connection with social integration/outreach of vulnerable inactive groups, and people with secondary education are called "counsellors" after ultra-short courses.

Conclusions and recommendations

This research was designed to describe the functioning (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) of four professional associations in relation to their members and national stakeholders, to support and improve dialogue in shaping national guidance systems across four European countries. We started this research with an exploratory research series, which included several steps. The first strand of analysis concentrated on the internal issues of professional associations. This internal perspective aimed to assess how effectively these organizations respond to the needs and expectations of their members, and how their leadership structures reflect principles of sound governance, strategic direction, and organizational transparency. The most effective response to members of professional associations from all four countries is **to support their professional development**.

The second analytical strand adopted an external lens, focusing on the perceptions of key stakeholders operating within the broader career guidance framework in each country. This component explored how various stakeholders – such as policymakers, educators, and labour market representatives – conceptualize the significance of career guidance in their national contexts. All stakeholders surveyed emphasize the importance of career guidance in “their” country, which requires a **strong professional community** that can be developed through active professional associations.

Together, these complementary views offer a nuanced understanding of both the functioning and external positioning of these professional associations, contributing to a more comprehensive view of their current impact and potential as policy makers within the European landscape. The variability in perspectives on the current status quo and in our respondents' expectations for the development of career guidance in each country inspired us to formulate common points for further steps, in the form of several recommendations.

1. **Maintaining the professional interest and motivation of career counsellors** working in non-governmental organisations, and providing them with opportunities for professional further training and self-development, is of paramount importance—especially in a regional context where career counselling/guidance as a profession is still not widely known or recognised. It is often difficult to distinguish the role of a career counsellor from that of other professions.
2. The informational nature of career counselling (providing career information to end-users) is well recognised by all the external actors and decision-makers, **but it is still not seen as a lifelong cross-policy support to personal development tasks** (e.g., development of career management skills through the different policy sectors and institutions (ELGPN, 2015; Sultana, 2011). Here, the NGOs have an important and difficult role in the region: to be the "ambassadors" of a change in attitude, even if it is not always a rewarding one.
3. **Strong professional advocacy and comprehensive, coordinated communication campaigns** would be needed to help the associated professions and end-users understand and absorb the overall significance of the LLG concept. Just as the professional advocacy and policy role of the sector must be further strengthened in all four countries.
4. **Professional standards formulated on clear, consistent professional principles** and their acceptance are necessary for the field to continue to develop and to guarantee adequate safety for users of career guidance and development services.
5. **Making career counselling services accessible to all citizens** is a very important role of a professional career counselling organisation. Accessibility refers both to promoting career counselling services

so that potential beneficiaries and end-users can easily access them, and to identifying resources that allow people from vulnerable groups who cannot afford private services to receive support.

6. All four associations work on an interdisciplinary basis, as career guidance requires integrating psychology, pedagogy, economics, law, and many other academic fields. Members of the associations also represent different disciplines; therefore, **further cooperation across disciplines** is an important direction for future development. Recent webinars on green guidance already illustrate how such interdisciplinary collaboration can work in practice.
7. Recent OECD (2024) studies also show that people with **low SES** (socio-economic status) **have extremely poor access to career guidance services**. We see this as another challenge that the four civil society organizations need to address.
8. Cross-sectoral co-operation is an essential element of career guidance. The membership of the associations provides a solid foundation for further boosting **field-level co-operation across sectors**. This is even more relevant as there are no national/regional systems in place to handle individual cases through the different sectors.

Our research has made it clear that there is a **strong professional need to strengthen the professional framework and guidelines for career guidance across all four countries, so that career guidance services can meet the expectations of their clients and society**. In the next phase of a joint project, we will undertake this.

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Declarations

We hereby confirm that this manuscript is original, has not been published elsewhere, and is not under consideration by any other journal. All authors have contributed to the work, reviewed the final manuscript, and approved its submission. The research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards, and any conflicts of interest have been disclosed.

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Budapest, 3rd of December 2025

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Boldly and without taboos

A case study of the First-Hand Information on Homelessness awareness-raising programme

Introduction

The average citizen in Hungary is likely to see homeless people mainly in urban public spaces, and to hear little about how many people experience homelessness besides rough sleepers, how these people live and possibly get into that situation. The lack of information fuels stereotypes and prejudices about homelessness and homeless people, which can also be reinforced by national legislation that currently criminalises the act of dwelling in public places (Molnár, 2019). This altogether can contribute to the negative discrimination of homeless people in everyday life and is likely to decrease public support for measures to prevent and alleviate homelessness.

To challenge stereotypes and negative opinions about homeless people, the *First-Hand Information on Homelessness (FHIH)* awareness-raising programme, based in Budapest, Hungary, combines personal interaction with homeless or formerly homeless people, and the sharing of information on homelessness. The programme was founded and is implemented by people with personal experience of homelessness, with support from *Roofless*, the Hungarian street paper published by Menhely (Shelter) Foundation. In the *FHIH* programme, experts by experience provide non-formal learning opportunities that they have designed for school students and adults. Their target audiences hear facts about homelessness and personal life stories directly from homeless or formerly homeless individuals, can discuss these topics and ask questions, and can try to put themselves in the shoes of homeless people through a game that incorporates drama elements.

Founded in 2009 and gradually developed since, the *FHIH* programme is unique within its sector in Hungary. By the end of 2025, a total of 975 events of various types had taken place, 70% of which were held in schools, attended by almost 25,000 people, mainly in Budapest but also in other locations. A wealth of experience was accumulated over more than 15 years, some of which may be relevant to others interested in awareness-raising or peer-led initiatives. Sharing such experience is the main objective of this paper.

In what follows, the *FHIH* programme will be placed in context through a brief discussion of homelessness and homeless services in Hungary, and a few selected features of the programme. Then its membership, organisation, and methods will be presented, followed by reflections from experts by experience on their participation, and from higher education students on a course implemented in cooperation with the *FHIH* programme. Finally, the discussion and conclusion will highlight some practical ideas and suggest additional areas for analysis. In our paper, we seek to integrate several standpoints, that of the first author, taking part in academic research training, and that of the experts by experience. We aim to avoid that the paper be dominated solely by the style of the first author, more familiar with academic writing requirements. Thus, an academic approach will be prevalent in the opening and closing parts, and less present in the description of specific programme elements.

This paper is based on the text of a lecture planned for Autumn 2025 by Gyula Balog (second author), expert by experience, founder and then leader of the *FHIH* programme, and Katalin Gyöngyösi (first author), a PhD student without experience of homelessness, formerly supporting the work of the *FHIH* programme as a volunteer, and cooperating repeatedly with experts by experience from the *FHIH* group for study, research and teaching purposes since 2019. The lecture would have presented the history and operation of the programme, with reflections from the target group and experts by experience. Following the unexpected passing of Gyula Balog, the first author continued to work on the text, completing and transforming it into an academic publication that presents thoughts and experiences

from the *First-Hand Information on Homelessness* programme, which Gyula had built with much effort and care. In this initiative, she was joined by Péter Lukács (third author), expert by experience with an international outlook and member of the FHIH programme, who consulted with her to develop the overall structure of the article, participated in writing the final description of the FHIH programme, collected necessary information from FHIH members, and shared thoughts and suggestions about the text. Other members of the programme and Staff at the *Roofless* street paper also contributed data and reflections. Thanks to all.

May Gyula, our friend, rest in peace. As he would say farewell: ALOHA!

Figure 1 — Gyula Balog

Forrás: WMN / Chripkó Lili

Context

Homelessness and homeless services in Hungary

Homelessness became a visible social problem of massive scale in Hungary near the end of the 20th century, after the great political and economic changes of 1989-1990, when people who recently lost their accommodation, often in parallel with losing their employment, started to appear in public spaces. In the following decades, with the weakening of the welfare state and in the absence of social policy to effectively prevent and reduce homelessness, a growing number of people with complex needs, facing multiple disadvantages over their life course, became homeless (Albert et al., 2019; Győri, P., 2020; Gyöngyösi et al., 2021).

Importantly, homelessness affects many more people than those living in public spaces. Homelessness can be defined in several ways, academically and in the policy field, in Hungary and internationally. At the European level, this complexity is reflected in the overarching “ETHOS Lights” typology developed by the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA, 2017). Its categories include not only people living rough, in emergency accommodation or in accommodation for the homeless, but also people living in health care or penal institutions (with no housing upon release), in nonconventional dwellings (e.g. huts, tents, mobile homes), and people who, due to their lack of housing, need to live temporarily in conventional housing with family or friends. As this typology demonstrates, homelessness can be understood as part of a spectrum of housing exclusion.

In Hungary, people living rough, in emergency accommodation, accommodation for people experiencing homelessness, or in nonconventional dwellings are legally considered homeless. The relevant law provides two definitions, one stipulating that a homeless person is an adult “who spend their nights in a public space or at premises not designed for human dwelling”, the other that a homeless person

is someone “without a registered address, or whose address is registered at a homeless facility” (Act 3/1993 on Social Administration and Social Benefits). Services for homeless people include street social work, night shelters, temporary hostels, day services, soup kitchens, a few rehabilitation facilities and elderly homes, and some dedicated health care services. (Temporary shelters for single mothers and for families are not officially part of homeless services, even though they serve a similar target group.)

Homelessness in Hungary is a predominantly urban phenomenon; most homeless services are provided in large cities, by local governments, NGOs and churches. Their financing is essentially quota-based, coming from the State. It allows for lower quality, often crowded basic services, with few options tailored to the complex and diverse (housing, health, employment and other) needs of clients, and long-term, “revolving door” homelessness is frequent in the country. (Albert et al., 2019).

Due to challenges in data collection (Teller et al., 2023), comprehensive figures on the number of homeless people are unavailable. However, based on expert estimates derived from administrative and research data, the number of homeless people (as defined by law) is approximately 30.000 in Hungary (Albert et al., 2019). This excludes several hundred thousand people who fall into other ETHOS Light categories and are at risk of becoming users of homeless services.

The *First-Hand Information on Homelessness* programme has been operating in this social and sectoral context. Although it was launched with support from a homeless service provider, the programme was initiated and is implemented by homeless experts by experience, relying on experiential knowledge, which is an important pillar of the programme’s self-definition. The following section will address this aspect.

Uses of experiential knowledge

The *FHIH* programme was inspired by two initiatives in which homeless people played active roles. The first was Roofless Street Paper[1], founded in Budapest in 1993 by a homeless man, Tibor Ungi. *Roofless* was – and has remained - written, edited, and sold on the streets by homeless people, in exchange for donations (not through begging). From the outset, it was published by the Menhely (Shelter) Foundation, a Budapest-based NGO that provides services to people experiencing homelessness. After the early death of Tibor Ungi, the subsequent chief editors of Roofless were delegated by Menhely (Shelter) Foundation, and a community of homeless and formerly homeless authors and distributors gradually formed around the newspaper. The social worker Róbert Kepe, still serving as chief editor today, has played a significant role in this. The other initiative important for the creation of the *FHIH* programme was the housing advocacy group *A Város Mindenkié* (*The City is for All*)[2], founded in 2009 by homeless people and their allies, most active in the 2010s. Some homeless people were involved in both the street paper and housing advocacy, including Gyula Balog, a founding member of *The City is for All* and the founder and lifelong leader of the *First-Hand Information on Homelessness* programme.

Gyula was born to a poor working family in Budapest. In his early years, he suffered physical abuse and a serious illness resulting in a one-year period of blindness and hospitalisation, and lasting impairment. He started consuming alcohol as a child with his parents and kept drinking daily from secondary school until his early thirties. The lasting effects of his childhood illness and his alcoholism prevented him from pursuing further studies, despite his outstanding intellectual abilities. He had already demonstrated strong communication and community organisation skills in his youth. By the age of 35, relying on the community of Alcoholics Anonymous, he gave up alcohol for the rest of his life. At the same time, he became homeless, and from that time on, he would live in temporary hostels, then rented rooms and a studio. Gyula followed the spiritual principles of the 12-step “anonymous” programmes throughout his life. He considered it his mission to perform a good deed for the community every day, which was

[1] https://fedelnelkul.hu/en/hitvallas/

[2] https://avarosmindenkie.blog.hu/2009/01/01/english_107

also reflected in the creation of the *First-Hand Information on Homelessness* programme[3].

The idea for the programme came to Gyula in 2009, after he met a secondary school teacher who bought issues of Roofless from him, read Gyula's testimonial on getting sober in the paper, and invited him to speak to students about his story and experiences. After this successful event, Gyula wished to organise similar sessions in other schools, involving more people with experience of homelessness. His plans were supported by *Roofless*, where Gyula, together with the chief editor, planned practical steps to launch the programme. *Roofless* applied for a first grant to fund it, and participants were recruited from the community of authors and distributors. In early times, social workers also participated in sessions, then a peer-only approach was taken, and professionals were only invited to sessions for (future) social professionals.

Thus, in the *FHIH* programme, the presentation of homelessness and homeless people is not done by social professionals, even though they have relevant knowledge about the issue and meet homeless people regularly. Instead, homeless or formerly homeless people take the main responsibility for designing sessions, educating target groups, moderating discussions, besides sharing their personal experience. As noted earlier, this design is important for its impact on target groups, as participants can see homeless people in active, competent, and leading roles, which challenges their stereotypes. From the perspective of homeless people in the programme, taking this role has an empowering effect (which we will return to later).

FHIH sessions draw on a combination of experiential knowledge, research, and other professional sources. Members refer to themselves as experts by experience. The term is not used here in a broad sense, considering anyone with experience of a particular situation an "expert by experience" of that situation. Instead, an expert by experience in the *FHIH* programme denotes people who have experiential knowledge of a difficulty and of how to handle it, who use this experience deliberately and consciously, for the benefit of people facing similar difficulties, in many ways. In their case, this occurs indirectly, with the aim of influencing people in "mainstream" society (while several members also use their experiential knowledge in other ways, e.g., in peer support). While based on practice, not theoretical works, this approach is in line with international interpretations of the homeless expert by experience role, as reflected, for instance, in Barker et al. (2018) or Costas et al. (2018), including a variety of possible tasks such as outreach to prospective clients, peer support work, participation in training and research in cooperation with academic actors, or policy consultations.

Awareness-raising

The main goal of the *FHIH* programme is to raise social awareness. (Another frequently used term for similar activities in Hungary is "sensibilisation".) Awareness-raising, as it is interpreted in *FHIH*, can be linked to a human rights approach claiming that people from disadvantaged social groups historically deprived of rights (such as, e.g., Black people in the United States, or people with disabilities worldwide) must be able to enjoy rights and dignity on an equal basis with others (Cargas, 2020; Brander et al., 2023). While legislation is an important tool to guarantee this, laws alone are insufficient to fundamentally change public thinking and attitudes (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019). Additional means include targeted education for specific groups on the consequences of discrimination and the advantages of reducing it, at the macro-level (e.g., through State-commissioned public media campaigns or in mandatory school curricula), or at the micro-level, through small-scale programmes reaching a limited audience (Sayers & Unesco Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, 2006; TAP Network, 2018). Considerable decision-making power and assets are necessary for macro-level awareness-raising, but micro-level initiatives can be built bottom-up, even by experts by experience, with limited means, as we can see in the case of this programme.

[3]For more details on Gyula's life, see for instance this interview, originally published in 2016: https://kozeletiskolaja.hu/post/balog-gyula-interju/

After this introduction, we will now present an overview of the programme's membership, organisation, and methods.

The First-Hand Information on Homelessness programme: members, organisational background, peer learning, and methods for awareness-raising

Membership

Figure 2 — Group photo of members of the First-Hand Information on Homelessness Programme, at their annual training in 2025

Source: Bárdos Bodza @bodzaphotography

The *First Hand Information on Homelessness* programme currently has a core group of about 15 active members, and a few "dormant" ones. The pool of experts by experience has expanded and changed since the beginning. New people are usually invited by group members, or occasionally by social workers in contact with the program. Invitation criteria usually include oral communication skills and willingness to share personal experiences in public situations. Membership tends to fluctuate for reasons related to work, family duties, moving, illness and passing away.

Since the programme's inception, its membership has been predominantly male, with members in their fifties or older. Currently, the average age of the members is close to 60, although in recent times, the number of both younger and female participants has increased. Members come from a variety of educational and work-experience backgrounds. Most members have at least a high school diploma. Some are already retired, and many are still actively working. Their professional background includes community organising, entrepreneurship, journalism, healthcare, hospitality, and social services. Gyula, the founder of the programme, has also completed an adult training programme for experts by experience in the field of poverty, piloted in Hungary (Bányai, 2018). Almost all members have a chronic medical condition or disability. About 40% of current members can still be considered homeless at present; one person is a rough sleeper, several members live in temporary shelters or have informal housing arrangements. Despite the challenges they face, and in addition to their FHIH activities, the majority of members pursue arts-related hobbies, including poetry, music, painting, and drawing, and have their work published in *Roofless* and occasionally in other media.

Organisation and financing

The programme is led by a coordinator (until 2025, by Gyula Balog, the programme's founder) who sets the main agenda and line of work, which group members can vote on, and make their own suggestions. Most tasks are taken up by group members on a voluntary basis and according to their availability.

Since its early years, the *FHIH* programme has also received support from the *Roofless* editorial unit at the Menhely (Shelter) Foundation. Staff at the unit working on *Roofless* have been providing administrative support that would otherwise be lacking, as the FHIH programme has not yet evolved into an autonomous NGO. This support has enabled the securing of grant-based funding for programme activities from sources available to NGOs, including funding to cover the group coordinator's salary. One employee at *Roofless* also accompanies *FHIH* activities on an ongoing basis, providing operational support as necessary and liaising with Menhely (Shelter) Foundation. Their contribution functions more like a voluntary partnership, without decision-making authority overriding the autonomy of experts by experience. In addition to grant-based financial support available through Menhely (Shelter) Foundation, the programme also receives support from donations, e.g., after its sessions at schools, NGOs, or businesses, or through fundraising campaigns. (Donations after sessions are voluntary, but they are recommended to compensate for the time, efforts and expertise of the group members.) Finally, the programme's operations are also supported by volunteers without experience of homelessness, who assist with tasks such as preparing for meetings, writing memos, managing social media and recruitment, or providing feedback on activities.

The FHIH group holds monthly sessions, usually at the Menhely (Shelter) Foundation. The agenda includes recurring items such as reflection on past events and planning future events, occasional live practice for sessions, and an overview of promotion and networking activities. These meetings also serve as social gatherings with refreshments, where program members can catch up on one another's major life events.

Nonformal and peer-to-peer learning of experts by experience

The monthly meetings also provide an opportunity to introduce potential new members to the group. Following their initial introduction, each new member undergoes the same learning process, accompanied by the member who invited them. During a dedicated meeting with the most experienced programme members, the potential new member drafts their life story in chronological order, condensing it to 12 minutes, while receiving advice and feedback on what to include, what to expand, and what to omit. At the next monthly meeting, the new member presents their life story, and everyone can share insights and feedback on structure, tempo, and style to help the new member gain confidence and deliver a more impactful presentation. The new member is also invited to visit schools and observe a few live sessions to familiarise themselves with their structure and implementation. Once their preparation is complete, the new member can begin participating in sessions, initially in the company of more experienced members, until they gain confidence and establish a routine.

In addition to individual learning, group learning events are also provided for members. These include an annual, three-day group training session that focuses on improving performance by practising every element of the sessions in front of an invited audience that provides feedback. These trainings also encourage teamwork, as *FHIH* members volunteer for tasks related to organising and running the training.

Since 2024, a new initiative, the *First-Hand Information on Homelessness Academy*, has been launched to equip members with up-to-date information on relevant topics, including housing policy, data collection on people experiencing homelessness, and the situation of homeless women. At these meetings, held approximately bimonthly, invited experts give presentations and answer questions. Written records and transcripts of the presentations are also prepared and shared with members.

Methods for awareness-raising

FHIH methods include sessions for schools, corporate employees, and other adult audiences; living library events; and collaborations with higher education and drama/theatre groups.

The audience is recruited through social media advertising, in *Roofless*, via emails to former partners and networks the programme participates in, and by word of mouth, especially among teachers already familiar with the programme.

Figure 3 — FHIH members leading an activity for students in an "Irregular Headmaster's Class"

Source: Fedél Nélkül Streetpaper official website

The most frequently held session type, titled *Irregular Headmaster's Class*, is designed for students in secondary schools or in the upper classes of elementary schools. (Frequently, lesson time dedicated to headmasters in the curriculum is used for these *FHIH* sessions, hence the name.) Typically, students in the same class participate in the session, but groups organised at the school level are also possible. Two or three *FHIH* members participate in each session, including, whenever possible, a man and a woman, with one person serving as facilitator. School sessions typically last 90 minutes (the duration of two regular school lessons). They consist of an opening discussion with the facilitator's guiding questions, which prompt students to share experiences with people experiencing homelessness, reflect on those experiences, and receive additional information on the topics raised (with the aim of establishing rapport and raising curiosity rather than criticism). This is followed by short life stories of two FHIH members and a Q&A session. The next element is a reality-based situational board game developed by the *FHIH* group that demonstrates the common challenges faced by homeless people. The game is facilitated by an *FHIH* member, and students volunteer for each round. They receive prompts describing a situation and are invited to improvise for 2-3 minutes, always playing the role of a homeless person, while *FHIH* members play all other roles (e.g., passers-by, security guards). Students are then asked about their experiences in their role. These situations are designed to further educate students about lesser-known aspects of homelessness, such as legal issues and structural barriers to services. Regarding students' ages, to avoid traumatic experiences, each scenario is enacted by FHIH members to achieve a realistic yet relatively positive outcome. At the end of the session, students can share their overall experience and receive recommendations for supporting people experiencing homelessness.

Figure 4 — FHIH member Péter Lukács (third author) at a living library event

Source: Bárdos Bodza @bodzaphotography

"Living libraries" are another session type, regularly brought to schools but also held in other contexts (e.g., institutions, public events such as NGO fairs). In these sessions, a few FHIH members participate as "living books" that the public can borrow and listen to, individually or in groups. The title and summary of the "books" are presented at the beginning. The public can "borrow" them for a preset time period, e.g., half an hour, by sitting aside, listening, and asking questions (respecting the boundaries communicated by the "book"). "Book" topics include sleeping rough, recovering from alcoholism, disability, prison experience or being a homeless woman.

Figure 5 — FHIH member Gábor Horváth in discussion at a corporate event

Source: Bárdos Bodza @bodzaphotography

Sessions for non-school audiences, e.g., in a business environment, combine elements such as discussion, games, storytelling, or a living library. The corporate partner's interests can inform the tailoring of the session to their needs. The *FHIH* programme has also piloted sessions featuring discussion and storytelling around a dinner table, in which all participants eat together in a less-structured, relaxed environment.

Thematic urban walks are outdoor sessions in *FHIH*. In these 1.5-2-hour group walks led by senior *FHIH* members, participants walk around downtown Budapest to visit places important from a homeless person's perspective. At each stop, participants hear factual explanations combined with personal stories, can ask questions, and chat with the leaders during the walk, which usually ends at a location where participants can sit together to discuss their experience with the walk leader(s).

Figure 6 — FHIH members Attila Takács (on the right) and Csilla Horváth (on the left) in a performance by Tandem Theatre

Source: revizoronline / Proics Lilla

FHIH members also regularly participate in collaborations in the fields of art and higher education. In some cases, members were involved in theatre productions on homelessness, in acting roles that draw on storytelling and dramatic elements from their awareness-raising activities (such as *Addressless* by the StereoAct Group[4] and *Revue on a Shoestring* by Tandem Theatre[5]). In higher education collaborations, *FHIH* brings its "irregular class" or living library sessions to higher education settings, hosts higher education students at its sessions held elsewhere, and consults with students working on study assignments related to homelessness. Over the past years, *FHIH* members have also been involved in participatory higher education courses alongside the first author, from which student reflections will be presented in this paper. First, we will focus on how experts by experience view their own work in the programme.

Reflections from experts by experience on participation in awareness-raising

In January-February 2026, in response to an email from a member of the *FHIH* group soliciting input for this paper, several members shared brief insights into their motivation for joining the programme, their experiences, and the perceived benefits of participation. In 2024, in interviews related to the first author's doctoral research, other *FHIH* members also discussed similar topics. Combining these two sources, a few recurring themes emerged.

From the perspective of experts by experience, success in implementing the programme, feelings of being "useful", and getting positive feedback from the target group are important drivers. Experiencing that a difficult story inspires others can have an empowering effect on the storyteller. The public often

[4] A video with English subtitles is available on this project at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pAsTUYytyEw (Last access: 01/30/2026)

[5] A short description and a trailer (in Hungarian) are available at https://tandemszinhaz.hu/fapados-revu/ and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QiRZUyH5SZA (Last access: 01/30/2026)

expresses empathy upon hearing life stories, and some participants report changes in their attitudes, which is rewarding for experts by experience.

Participating in the programme also provides an opportunity to apply and develop expertise and competencies, such as knowledge of homelessness and skills in communication, organisation, teamwork, leadership, and non-formal education methods. Individual learning and the possibility to demonstrate their competence are valued by several members.

Another perceived advantage of being involved in the programme is that it helps to establish contact between experts by experience and people who are not homeless. The organisation and implementation of sessions involve communicating and cooperating with teachers and other professionals of various profiles and ranks. This, along with advertising the programme and maintaining contact with friends and supporters, also helps experienced experts expand their social and professional networks.

Social bonds within the group, a sense of belonging, mutual emotional and practical support are of utmost importance for most group members. Members usually make at least a few new friends in the group. A relationship between two members has turned into marriage. Group members look out for and help one another with personal problems. For many of them, this serves as a substitute for missing family support, and they particularly appreciate the cohesion, inclusivity, and care for one another within the group as an added benefit of their awareness-raising work.

After discussing the perspective of experts by experience, we turn to the experiences of the target group, illustrated by a university course in which the first and second authors and other *FHIH* members participated.

Reflections from higher education students on taking part in awareness-raising

The course *Experts by experience, peer support in the human services* was accredited by the Bárczi Gusztáv Faculty of Special Needs Education of ELTE Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest in 2023, at the initiative of the first author, then an early-stage PhD student. The participative teaching approach adopted for several courses at this Faculty, in which disabled/neurodiverse experts by experience work in teaching roles together with trained academic teachers (Cserti-Szauer et al., 2022), was one of the inspirations for starting it. The first author designed the main framework and objectives, deliberately leaving space for further details on topics and methods to be elaborated jointly with experts by experience at a later stage. The course ran for two semesters during the 2023-2024 academic year and was taught in English. It was offered as an elective to both international and Hungarian students as a small-group seminar with classroom sessions and short field visits. Each semester, it focused on three areas where peer support existed (mental health, homelessness, disability, or addiction). The content of classes and visits was developed in collaboration with experts by experience from each field, who were invited by the first author. The experts by experience either implemented sessions fully designed by themselves, or, more often, they planned and implemented them together with the first author. Homelessness was on the agenda in both semesters, in cooperation with the *First-Hand Information on Homelessness* programme for classroom sessions and field visits. In total, 23 students participated in one or more of these.

After field visits, students were required to write brief reflection notes in response to guiding questions to support their learning and to provide feedback to all contributors. (Students had been informed that their anonymised collected notes would be used for feedback, and they could opt for sending reflections to the teacher only.) In what follows, we summarise students' reflections on the work of *FHIH* experts by experience.

Students appreciated the opportunity to gain a closer understanding of the topics discussed by meeting experts by experience in the classroom and during field visits. Almost unanimously, they reported that this course was the first time they learnt from experts by experience in higher education. They valued the openness and honesty of experts by experience, especially when they talked about personal diffi-

culties and painful experiences. (The expression “boldly and without taboos” in the title of this paper is quoted from a student reflecting on this aspect.) Chances for interaction, rather than plenary lectures, were also very welcome.

Students underlined that hearing about lived experience gave them new perspectives on homelessness and on people experiencing homelessness, helped them realise the complexity of human stories and social contexts behind this phenomenon, and made them aware of their own often privileged social position. Several of them reported that meeting members of a group they had known only superficially changed their stereotypes, and they felt more open and willing to talk with homeless people and support them. Finally, they repeatedly remarked that they would have liked to talk more with experts by experience.

Regarding areas for improvement, students mentioned practical organisational issues, such as time management and the need to allocate more time to activities. They also expressed their need for more preliminary information on what to expect in sessions and special appreciation for occasionally working with experts by experience with whom they could communicate in English without translation (such experts were the exception rather than the rule over the two semesters).

Discussion

As we have seen, the *First-Hand Information on Homelessness* programme has successfully developed and implemented a portfolio of awareness-raising activities, drawing on the experience and skills of its members who are homeless or formerly homeless. It has retained its peer-led character, with operational support from the *Roofless* editorial team, which has actively promoted the concept and practice of peer involvement and peer community development for many years, in partnership with experts by experience. The scope of *FHIH* activities has expanded gradually, in line with members' capacities and competencies, who receive peer-to-peer inductive training, mentoring, and opportunities for further education to successfully perform their roles in awareness-raising.

The programme's activities follow the principles of non-formal education, not because *FHIH* members derived them from academic literature or preliminary formal professional training, but primarily because the programme's founder and several senior members were familiar with such methods through experience or non-formal learning, and they received additional input from social professionals, allies supporting the programme. *FHIH* sessions are characterised by deliberate design of content and methods; they require the mobilisation of prior knowledge and the active involvement of the target group. They often use facilitated discussion, reflection, and analysis of concrete cases (e.g., personal stories), as well as experience-based learning, particularly play, drama, or outdoor elements. At the same time, *FHIH* activities can be adapted and integrated into various settings, including formal education institutions, particularly at secondary and tertiary levels, businesses, and community events for the general public.

At present, experts by experience mainly work in the FHIH programme on a voluntary basis. When compared with findings from research on volunteering, notably the impact of volunteering on senior volunteers, FHIH members highlight similar personal benefits, such as feeling useful, staying active, a widening of their personal network, a sense of belonging (Jensen et al., 2014). For younger members still of active age, voluntary work of this kind could also serve as a preparatory phase for paid employment through the experience they gain of active teamwork, individual responsibility, and various skills demanded for the task. Given the employment tendencies of homeless people in Hungary (Vágner, 2021), these are valuable assets for entering the job market. However, most of active younger FHIH members are either in full-time employment already, or live with a chronic illness or disability which allows for part-time work, in jobs or settings dedicated to people with special needs, leaving time for at least occasional participation in FHIH during regular working hours. Thus, under the present arrangement (no regular, stable income for FHIH members except for the coordinator), volunteering in FHIH seems most suited for experts by experience partially or fully absent from the job market, with no

intention to move forward. This at once influences the selection and retention of experts by experience in the programme, which seems to be a constant without a more predictable and even workload and financial compensation for participants, and a limitation to the further growth and development of the programme.

Overall, the *First-Hand Information on Homelessness* programme provides an example of constructively blending experiential and professional knowledge. This can be considered a remarkable result, as in the field of social affairs as elsewhere, knowledge from scientific sources and the experiences of trained professionals are traditionally considered more reliable than knowledge based on lived experience, and experiential knowledge is often perceived more of a challenge to dominant discourses and inherent power relations (Duffy & Beresford, 2021; Gillard, Foster & Sweeney, 2020). The operation of the FHIH programme conforms to principles of ethical storytelling, an approach to communication and awareness-raising that prevents "tokenism" by safeguarding experts by experience from being used for organisational purposes (Halais, 2023; Frameworks Institute, 2025). The narratives of experts by experience reflect their lived experiences and their decisions on what to share, and they are not selected or edited to serve the interests of professionals or organisations.

Finally, from a theoretical perspective, at micro-level the activities of the *FHIH* programme demonstrate the potential to contribute to countering epistemic injustice, i.e. the phenomenon when certain people are inhibited in making sense of their experience due to gaps in collective social interpretations, dominated by a powerful majority, or when their words are given less credibility because they belong to a certain group hit by negative stereotypes/prejudices (Fricker, 2007).

Conclusion

To conclude this case study, we will specify its limitations, draw some practical conclusions, and suggest further areas for analysis.

Regarding limitations, the aim of this study was to share experiences from the First-Hand Information on Homelessness programme by presenting its background, principles, structure, methods, and selected feedback. While the programme can be analysed from an academic perspective, drawing on concepts from several disciplines (especially the critical social sciences, education, and social work), it was originally not developed from an academic standpoint. Consequently, applying an overall academic analytical perspective commonly used in academic publications to the whole study would have been misleading and inauthentic. Instead, efforts were made to achieve a balanced combination of an expert-by-experience perspective and interpretations and comments from an academic perspective (that of the first author, a PhD student), while remaining consistent with the programme's overall ethos.

With respect to practical conclusions, experience from the *FHIH* programme suggests that when building a similar programme "bottom-up", starting as an initiative of experts by experience, then it is important to plan for gradual development, enough time for preparation, practice and piloting, to let everyone explore their potential and get used to their roles. This might require significantly more time and effort than crafting a research-based programme with input from trained experts and/or academics, only occasionally involving experts by experience, in roles assigned to them by experts by training. Experience from the ca. 15 years of the *FHIH* programme suggests that the authenticity of awareness-raising sessions and the empowerment of experts by experience are best achieved when they, rather than professionals or academics, initiate and lead these activities.

While the initial purpose of the FHIH programme had been the development and implementation of awareness-raising sessions, the formation of a small community of experts by experience participating in it proved to be an added benefit. A professional learning and support group can be an asset for anyone in any context, but for homeless experts by experience who are still living in vulnerable situations, such a community provides emotional and practical support that otherwise might be lacking in their personal

lives. Hence, deliberate efforts and time dedicated to community building are strongly recommended for similar programmes involving experts by experience.

Given the current administrative and financial burden of establishing and operating an NGO in Hungary, the launch of initiatives such as the *FHIH* programme can be substantially facilitated by support from an established organisation willing to provide human and financial resources. This might cover basic operational aspects that might be too demanding for homeless experts by experience who often work other jobs, have fragile health or disabilities, or lack relevant legal or financial knowledge. However, it is paramount that staff at the supporting organisation clearly understand the relevance of experiential knowledge and have an empowering attitude. Then, a programme built on experiential knowledge and the self-governance of experts by experience can be accepted and genuinely supported within the broader organisational culture. In organisations with no prior experience working with experts by experience, it is necessary to include advance planning, targeted staff training, group reflection, familiarising staff with experts by experience, and dedicating sufficient time for mutual understanding and trust to develop and for attitudes to change.

Finally, for further research relating to the programme, we consider it worthwhile to explore in detail the connections between the *FHIH* programme and public education - e.g. curricula, school subjects and developmental areas -, and the outcomes of general and professional training in vocational education, especially for professions implying contact with homeless people, such as law enforcement, public service or social assistance.

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Claudia STÖCKL

Review: Wolfgang Sünkel: Process of Education and Field of Education

General Theory of Education, Vol. 2.

Edited by Johanna Hopfner, Weinheim: Beltz Juventa 2025.

A scientifically clear understanding of education is a basic prerequisite and a key concern of “education” as a scientific discipline. It can be approached empirically, pragmatically or theoretically, with these approaches referring to and relying on each other. *Wolfgang Sünkel* (1934-2011) devoted his research to the theoretical foundations of education and teaching. He chose the phenomenological approach of "action problem structure analysis", which he developed in the phenomenology of teaching (Sünkel, 1996, §§5-13) and finally in his General Theory of Education. In 2025 the second volume of the General Theory of Education was published posthumously, edited by Johanna Hopfner. The first volume of the Theory of Education (Sünkel, 2011) comprised Part I “Concept of Education” and Part II “Educational Relationship”; the second volume now supplements Part III “Process of Education” and Part IV “Field of Edcuation”. The publication is based on the manuscript for Part III (Educational Process), which was completed by Wolfgang Sünkel himself, an on his preliminary work on Part IV (Field of Education): lecture notes compiled by Edgar Birzer and Christine Sommer and reviewed by Wolfgang Sünkel, as well as notes and recollections by the editor Johanna Hopfner from discussions with the author.

Since the content and form of this second volume follow on seamlessly from the first volume, the key points on the concept of education and the educational relationship will be briefly summarised here before the process and the field of education are explained in more detail.

Wolfgang Sünkel’s General Theory of Education contains a logical description of education, i.e. “*what education is*, what it always has been and always will be, what role it has to fulfil in human life, how it perceives and actually fulfils this role, and what laws it is subject to” (Sünkel, 2011, §1). This approach differs from pragmatic considerations for improving educational practice and from empirical

concerns for researching concrete historical forms of education. In human life, education has the task of preserving the "non-genetic dispositions for activity", i.e. knowledge, skills and motives, beyond the threshold of mortality (Sünkel, 2011, § 12). Since genetic inheritance is out of the question, this task can only be fulfilled through *activity*, more precisely through two complementary sub-activities that make up the structure of education: imparting and acquiring (Sünkel, 2011, § 17). Wolfgang Sünkel therefore defines education as "the mediated acquisition of non-genetic dispositions for activity" (Sünkel 2011, § 51). Both sub-activities are performed by subjects, which is why Sünkel refers to education as a "bisubjective activity" (Sünkel, 2011, §18). The sub-activities are not linearly related to each other; rather, the causal relationship through which education/imparting and acquisition are related to each other is characterized as "contingent" and "diffuse" (Sünkel, 2011, §§ 85-86). Finally, the mediating influences on the activity of acquisition are not limited to those emanating from an educator, but can also originate from indeterminate sources, such as the social environment (Sünkel, 2011, §§ 88-90).

Volume 2 of the General Theory of Education continues on this basis and takes a closer look at the "Process of Education" and the "Field of Education" and thus the *temporal* dimension and *social embedding* of education.

With the temporal dimension, Sünkel addresses the open beginning and open end of education, the biographical and historical period of education in between (Sünkel, 2025, §§ 171-175), as well as pedagogically based ideas of adulthood (Sünkel, 2025, §§ 174, 177). With regard to the process aspect of education, the focus is on the changes in the pupil, more precisely on the changes in his or her dispositional characteristics, his or her personal disposition system (Sünkel, 2025, §181). The process perspective requires educators to think of the pupil in terms of change: both "as the person he is – at present – and as the changed person he will, can or should be in the future" (Sünkel, 2015, § 183). In this context, the pupil's currently real disposition system (real mode) is placed in relation to a "no longer real", remembered mode and a "not yet real" mode *that has* only *been drafted* (retrospective or prospective mode) (Sünkel, 2025, § 196). It is important to mention that both the pupil and the educator have their own ideas about the prospective mode (Sünkel, 2025, § 197). This process structure of education allows Sünkel to address and assess current discourses such as lifelong learning, and systematic questions such as the goal of education in a well-founded pedagogical manner.

From a field perspective, Wolfgang Sünkel analyses the interactions between education and the overall social system with its economic, cultural, political, social and legal aspects, which have "a dual, seemingly contradictory meaning" for education: "Field conditions not only hinder or prevent education, they also make education possible in the first place" (Sünkel, 2025, § 204). This is where pedagogical social criticism can come into play, guided by the criterion of the "feasibility of educationally logical structures in social reality" (Sünkel, 2025, § 203). Furthermore, against the backdrop of the field of education, the relationship between work and education can be examined in more detail (Sünkel, 2025, § 207) and the specific, ambiguous nature of "educational situations" can be determined (Sünkel, 2025, § 208). The two sections on the field of education, which Johanna Hopfner reconstructed from the lecture notes, are accompanied by an addendum in which Wolfgang Sünkel explicitly addressed the lack of a theory of the field of education and the systematic difficulties of this theory (Sünkel, 2025, pp. 64-67). He provides an overview of the limitations and possibilities of field theory considerations, which the editor Johanna Hopfner herself follows up with two episodes and an epilogue. They classify Wolfgang Sünkel's systematics of the field of education against the background of various disciplines and highlight the challenges and dangers associated with the business of education tensed between the individual and society.

Finally, the second volume of the General Theory of Education contains further unpublished lectures and writings by Wolfgang Sünkel as an appendix. They provide insight into the intellectual history of the General Theory, revealing thought as a movement in *time* and as *an activity* that led to the concise and condensed formulations of the General Theory of Education.

The second volume thus completes Wolfgang Sünkel's General Theory of Education. In just 82 pages, process and field of education are presented in a precise and highly condensed form, yet in a way that is understandable and illustrated with vivid, sometimes anecdotal examples. Without detracting from the accuracy of the presentation, the text is interspersed with wit and humour. This makes it clear that the detached abstractness necessary for a general, theoretical undertaking, entirely in line with phenomenological intent, is not at odds with concrete life and educational experiences, but rather systematically illuminates them.

This makes the two volumes of General Theory of Education (orig. *Allgemeine Theorie der Erziehung*) suitable for use as study literature in (social and elementary) education courses as well as in teacher training courses. In addition, educational research can now build on a complete, solid foundation for further theoretical, empirical and pragmatic discussions, which is certainly desirable for the subject.

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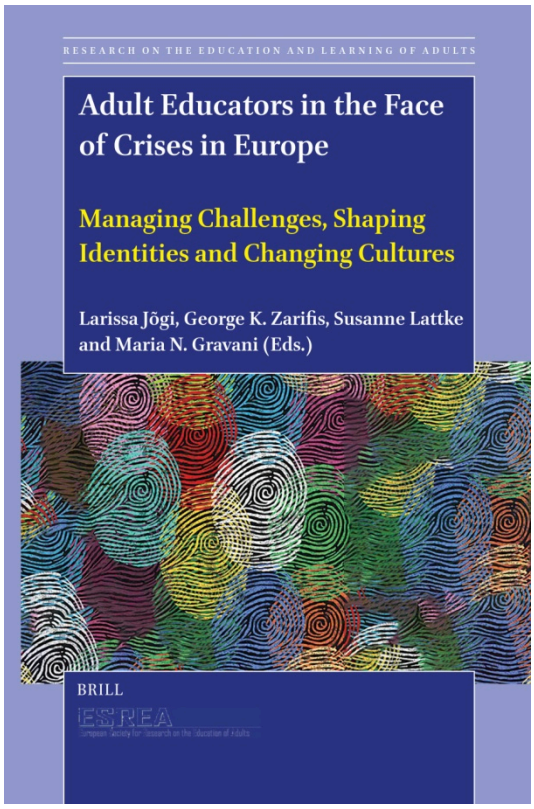
Balázs NÉMETH

Adult Educators in the Face of Crises in Europe

Managing Challenges, Shaping Identities and Changing Cultures.



This open-access book, available from BRILL Publishers, provides a good insight into the evolving identities, practices, and challenges faced by adult educators across Europe in the context of recent crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and economic and social upheavals. These events have reshaped the educational landscape, constrained adult learning, and demanded rapid adjustments from adult educators. Accordingly, this book analyses how these crises shape up educators' identities, agency, and professional practice in the context of the precarious working conditions many face. Through empirical studies and theoretical reflections, the book scrutinizes how adult educators cope with these turbulent times, focusing on identity formation, professionalisation, and adaptation, while underscoring the ethical and social dimensions of their work.

The twelve papers, together with the foreword by Emilio Lucio-Villegas, clearly reflect how recent trends and issues have constrained adult educators as they respond to economic and environmental challenges, resulting in social inequalities and instabilities. Lucio-Villegas argues that not only the COVID-19 Pandemic but several other events have made adult educators' work more difficult, such as the war in Ukraine, the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians—which have already resulted in significant loss of life—and actions of the Trump administration, especially during its second term, which sought to limit freedom of critical voices, reduce autonomy, and weaken fair international relations grounded in mutuality, respect, and solidarity, as represented by the United Nations and its organizations such as UNESCO and WHO.

However, Lucio-Villegas, in his preface, highlights ways adult educators might respond to the aforementioned challenges and the associated trends and issues. Invoking Antonio Gramsci, he points out that an Optimism of the Will is essential to advancing a pedagogy of hope. He also emphasizes that

education must remain a humanistically driven endeavor, promoting equity, inclusion, and equality, particularly for underrepresented and vulnerable adults and their communities. At the same time, he contends that adult educators should foster collective encouragement and engagement, rather than be overshadowed by unchecked, absolute authority; thus, they must strive for dignity, critical thinking, and participatory action to establish a foundation for knowledge sharing and skill development. Finally, Lucio-Villegas closes his foreword by stressing that adult education is primarily a tool for fostering individuals and personalities committed to active and democratic citizenship, a theme reflected in all the papers within this book.

In the first chapter, Larissa Jõgi and co-editors reflect on the challenges arising from the crisis in adult education and outline steps educators should take in response. The collected chapters address matters of profession and professionalisation amid uncertainties around identity, agency, practice, and precarious working conditions.

Book chapters on theoretical elaborations and empirical analyses provide a thorough scrutiny of identity formation, professionalization, and adaptation, while demonstrating the ethical and social dimensions of working with adults. It also addresses the choices and limitations of digitalization in learning environments, including access and opportunities, and the emergence of new learner groups with vulnerable and underrepresented aspects of participation and non-participation.

This collection of 12 chapters provides readers with an overview of current issues and trends. It helps them understand and critically engage with the professionalization of adult educators and the profession's search for resilience and innovation. The book addresses the importance of quality development in adult education to improve knowledge transfer and skills development, considering methodological, digital, and technological advancements. This focus aligns with the 2021 New European Agenda on Adult Learning (EC, 2021) and the 2022 UNESCO Marrakech Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2022). These recommendations address the emerging skills agenda of organizations such as the OECD, the World Economic Forum, and the ILO and promote the professionalization of adult educators to help develop adult learners' basic skills.

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Copyright Year: 2026

Availability: Adult Educators in the Face of Crises in Europe – Managing Challenges, Shaping Identities and Changing Cultures | Brill

E-Book (PDF) open access

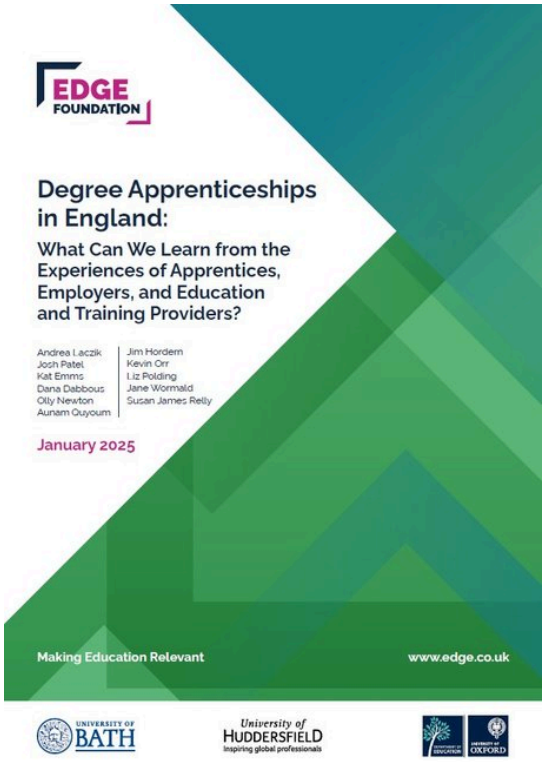
ISBN: 978-90-04-74798-2

Publication: 24 Nov 2025

Publisher: De Gruyter Brill

Krisztina NAGY

New ways in vocational education in England: Degree Apprenticeships



Original paper: Edge Foundation: *Degree Apprenticeships in England: What can we learn from the experiences of apprentices, employers, and education and training providers?*, 2025

Authors: Andrea Laczik, Josh Patel, Kat Emms, Dana Dabbous, Olly Newton, Aunam Quyoum, Jim Hordern, Kevin Orr, Liz Polding, Jane Wormald, Susan James Relly.

Introducing the Degree Apprenticeships training format

An apprenticeship (Hungarian: „tanoncképzés") combines classroom education with practical training in the workplace. Unlike previous university courses that focused on traditional professions, industries are now increasingly interested in the DA type of practical, apprenticeship-based higher education. This format, advertised for both young people and adults, can provide a skilled workforce for today's and tomorrow's economy. It aims to reduce shortages of higher-level skills, support national economic growth, and create channels to supply skilled labor. DAs include UK level 6 programs leading to a bachelor's degree and level 7 programs leading to a master's degree. There are currently 161 approved training programmes, nearly 50,000 students, and more than 100 universities involved. The training directly reflects employers' needs. Students gain practical experience during working hours with employers, who participate in developing, evaluating, and implementing the curriculum. This supports the company's workforce development. Training participation is time-consuming; programs usually last 3–6 years, depending on the field (e.g., engineering, IT, healthcare, finance). Students must work full-time and study at university simultaneously, which can be a significant burden. The level and implementation of training vary between institutions, making uniform quality difficult to ensure.

Similar to dual training in Hungary, students sign an employment contract with employer organizations providing practical training. Students complete 30 hours of practical training and work per week and spend at least 6 hours per week learning at a higher education institution. Training is free for students and is financed through the Apprenticeship Levy, which employers pay into a digital fund. Employers with an annual wage bill over £3 million pay 0.5% of their wage bill into this fund, which the government

supports with a 10% monthly supplement. DA courses are developed in partnership between the higher education institution and the assigned professional economic organization.

The research

Between 2022-2023, Andrea Laczik and her colleagues examined the first results of the new training system introduced, seeking answers to the questions of how the stakeholders of the new training, the employers undertaking practical training, universities and students, and policy makers, think about the new training. Conducted the study, they used a qualitative, semi-structured online interview method (n=92), enabling a comparative examination of partners' opinions across different industries (engineering, healthcare, digital technology) and the exploration of individual experiences. The analysis was carried out using a deductive and inductive approach, thematic content analysis. The researchers used NVivo software to organize the data. The procedure followed the steps of the Braun and Clarke model, with particular attention to identifying and interpreting patterns. The research team extended data collection to the entire territory of England, most of which was conducted in the digital technology, construction, and engineering sectors.

Research Experiences

When reviewing the 73-page study divided into 10 chapters, the reviewer focuses on the main experience of the introduction of DA training in England, similar to the Hungarian dual training, from two perspectives:

- *What are the motivations of the interviewed representatives of the university, employers providing practical training, and students?*
- *What are the first experiences, what works well, and what obstacles make the implementation of the training difficult? To what extent do DAs fit the needs of local employers and the needs of the national economy, and how can they support social mobility and social equality upward?*

Further experiences

The fourth chapter is about the development of training. The central dilemma is the relationship between practical training and the academic, university-based assessment. In other words, it is possible that students receive their diplomas before the final practical assessment is completed. The design of training courses is shaped not only by professional standards but also by resource, capacity, and organizational aspects, which is why development, planning, and implementation are often blurred in practice.

The fifth chapter examines differences in the implementation of training courses across institutions and programs. For example, the implementation of learning outside the workplace in an online or in-person format, the extent to which the workplace is considered a priority, and the kind of learning environment and supporting infrastructure that accompany the learning process. The chapter emphasizes that, given the specificity of DAs, participants are primarily employees rather than students. Consequently, the design and operation of programs are often aligned with the employer's priorities. The effectiveness may be further worsened by the practice of higher education institutions, for cost-effectiveness and organizational reasons, merging small DA groups with larger, non-apprenticeship student groups, which causes numerous learning problems. Training institutions also strive to ensure that instructors consciously take into account the time and workload constraints arising from their status as employees.

Motivation

Chapter six, which deals with motivation, confirms that the main motivating factors for students are career and advancement hopes, the benefits of practice-oriented learning, and financial considerations. The study of students' motivations shows that the opportunity to obtain a degree is attractive, that

it is a more practice-oriented, work-based form of learning than traditional university education, and that this brings financial benefits. An important motivating factor is therefore the avoidance of student loans and the possibility of studying while earning money, although the level of salary does not always provide adequate financial security. The overall level of satisfaction among participants is high, especially regarding career opportunities and professional development, but perceptions of the quality of the training and institutional support are mixed. Reconciling work, study, and private life is a significant challenge, especially for older students with family responsibilities.

Employers offering internships are motivated by the opportunity to "train" a skilled, adaptable, self-directed workforce. For them, collaborations with universities, expanding the network of contacts, and the opportunity to share knowledge in the field of work-based learning are strategic. The problem was that the employer's information and the program information were incomplete. Employers offering internships say the Apprenticeship Levy fund did not achieve the goals the government hoped for, because companies paying contributions interpreted it as a kind of "tax" and did not necessarily spend the full amount on DAs. According to the study, several employer interviewees emphasized that DAs work better for larger organizations because of the organizational capacity and administrative requirements required to operate the program. Concerns have been raised that training is not very adaptable and slow to keep up with changes, and that it focuses more on future skills shortages than on meeting current needs. Based on interviews, several employers indicated that degree apprenticeship programs are often used to develop existing employees, rather than for new young entrants or career starters. This can be problematic because the program's original purpose was partly to provide an alternative route into higher education and the labor market for new entrants. As the study says: „There are concerns that increases in expensive DAs normally taken by employees already in the workforce are to the detriment of resourcing and support for apprenticeships to help young people enter the workforce." (Laczik et al., 2024, 5).

As a motivating factor for *higher education institutions*, the program represents both an opportunity and a challenge: it strengthens industrial partnerships and work-based learning, but it also increases administrative burdens and the need for organizational adaptation.

Chapter seven highlights that the effectiveness of DAs depends not only on the quality of the curriculum, but also on the organization of partnerships, the accessibility of communication, and the incentives for resource allocation. The implementation of partnership relationships in collaboration is very mixed: in some cases, a strong relationship of trust is typical and long-term cooperation is established; in others, the relationships are weak and in need of development.

The eighth chapter of the study deals with the integration of learning and work. It states that the quality of learning during DA training is determined by the extent to which its implementation aligns with the curriculum, workplace expectations, and the student's living space. The chapter points out a fundamental tension between the accelerated training time of DAs, the high expectations, and the logic of workplace production. Only strong employer support and flexible organizational frameworks can manage this.

The ninth chapter of the study, summarizing the ten-year history of DAs in England, examines the research findings in the context of higher education, vocational training, and labour market policy. The chapter offers both positive assessments (DAs as flexible, work-based learning pathways) and critical reflections (regulatory overload, communication deficit, unequal access, sustainability risks). Areas for improvement include:

- Low awareness and misunderstandings
- Limited availability
- Administrative burdens

- Quality and consistency
- Time-consuming programme
- The following expectations are formulated for the programme:
- contribute to national economic growth and address low productivity levels
- contribute to addressing higher-level skills shortages
- facilitate social mobility
- contribute to a more diverse workforce.

Conclusion

The tenth, concluding chapter, then translates the previous empirical findings into concrete educational policy intervention proposals. It suggests three main directions: coordinated labor-market partnership (not institutional competition); a balance of flexible standards and stable quality assurance; and strengthening information and mentoring infrastructure.

In summary, the program's introduction aimed to ensure that DAs play a significant role in supporting workforce diversity and providing wider access to higher education. Employers' motivation is to obtain a workforce with knowledge and skills beyond traditional university education, aligned with industry needs, thereby increasing organizational performance. The knowledge acquired in practice includes, on the one hand, soft skills, business approach, work experience, and integration skills, on the other hand, technical knowledge, while participants are also able to apply the acquired theoretical knowledge in practice.

The study is of interest to Hungarian higher education institutions that face the practice of dual education, but the English experiences may also be important for Hungarian practical training organizations. It is important to note that a quarter of a century after the change of regime, the period that has passed is perhaps sufficient for researchers in the science of andragogy to draw general theoretical and practical conclusions from an andragogic perspective, so I recommend the study to their attention as well.