
BENEDEK András

The 50th Welcome

The first issue of Opus et Educatio was published in November 2014. Thanks to electronic archiving, the process of publishing this summer issue alongside the 50th issue is fully documented. Although “only” 12 years have passed since the launch of the magazine, in our fast-paced world, the 50th issue can be considered significant without exaggeration in the era of epochal development in electronic publishing. So far, 596 publications have been published across the fifty issues.

Drawing some parallels with the much more complex events of human life, the past dozen years have brought many changes to our individual lives, including the work processes of the editorial staff. Although the personnel changes have affected not only our twice-renewed editorial board but also the editorial staff, I would like to thank *Cz. János Horváth*, one of the initiators of the launch of the journal and its continuous technical developer, and *Anildo Vedovatti*, our senior editor, with whom we have been taking care of and “raising” **Opus et Educatio** since the beginning. The history of the journal instructively reflects the changes that also vividly reflect domestic changes in the process of publishing scientific publications.

On the occasion of the anniversary, it is worth looking back at the original and current guiding goals in terms of our current aspirations. In fact, nothing has changed; we strive to publish articles analyzing problems that “...concern many, especially those who professionally deal with the human factor and its development in the world of work.” Continuing the idea formulated in 2012: “...the intention is not an end in itself, and especially not aimed at analyzing topics designated by fashion or specific communication goals.”

Well, a dozen years have passed; it is left to the reader to judge to what extent our original aspirations have been realized. The publication of research results related to vocational training is continuously carried out in the Studies section. Our effort to provide those in the first stage of their research careers – especially those coming from practice and those pursuing their doctoral studies – with publication opportunities and to support them in publishing their first demanding publications, which are also recognized by the evaluation process, has also met the needs of the authors. In the first years, the periodicals, still formed on the initiative of university departments, became members of the **BME Journal** family of the **Budapest University of Technology and Economics (BME)** within a decade. Thanks are also due to the leaders and staff of the **BME OMIKK**, who provide the most up-to-date library professional support to the editorial staff of Opus et Educatio.

The launch of the journal was a specific modernization initiative 12 years ago, driven by a commitment to electronic online publication culture. After some deliberation, we chose a name for our periodical in 2012. The sound of **Opus et Educatio** is a bit archaic, and, as we initially indicated, it may even seem conservative. Another thought from the opening issue that is still relevant today: “...Work and education, which is more than the traditional vocational training profile,... The active participation in the history of domestic vocational training, from József Stoczek, the first rector of the Technical University and director of the teacher training institute, through Sándor Imre, professor of pedagogy and psychology, to Professor Elemér Biszterszky, has proven with a series of scholars spanning significant eras how open the world of education is to the results of socio-economic and technical development.” In the spirit of traditions that have been forming for more than a century and a half, Opus et Educatio, as a university periodical dealing with the world of work and education from a multidisciplinary perspective, is closely connected to education, and within that, to teacher training. Due to this connection, one of the peculiarities of our magazine is that our issues are now published alternately in English and Hungarian.

The 50th issue is published in English. Its structure reflects the latest changes; after the usual, but festive, introduction, readers can find an article on a current, complex topic that is noticeable in publication

trends in the **Online-First** section. *Lili Sotovszky's* study, *"Authentic Speech and Pedagogical Transformation: Rethinking the Language Teacher's Role in the Technological Age"*, clearly demonstrates the latest changes in their pedagogical thinking. *The Studies* section includes four publications that, in line with the journal's thematic focus, present research on development trends and comparative analyses in higher and adult education. Our **Start-Up** section also highlights an international group of authors through concrete research and comprehensive analyses. Since our magazine also functions as a forum, part of the professional information is about a major conference, which in this issue shows the growing international importance of Lifelong Learning in higher education. Finally, our issue also contains a review: the presentation of *Vilmos Vass's* book, *"The Soul of Pedagogy – Stories from the World of Teaching"*, as well as Hungarian youth research. Analysis prepared in the framework of *"Youth Beyond Generations: Inequalities, Post-Adolescence, and Hybrid Transition to Adulthood"*; the descriptions show how lively and fresh research Opus et Educatio undertakes to present.

Dear Reader,

Thank you for honoring our page with your attention; we appreciate your comments and suggestions as we continue to develop **Opus et Educatio**. Special thanks go to the authors of Educatio and the reviewers who took an active role in the professional review. It is gratifying that a significant number now regularly publish and take a role in the evaluation process. Special thanks and gratitude to the members of our *Editorial Board*, who, as committed supporters of *Open Access* publishing practice, do their work conscientiously, selflessly, and without financial compensation. In our technologized world, one fact remains: **Opus et Educatio** is an up-to-dated "craft product" in which we put a lot of human work; AI does not write the announcements, and perhaps that makes us special.

Budapest, August 2026

András Benedek

Chief Editor of Opus et Educatio

Lili SOTKOVSKY

Authentic Speech and Pedagogical Transformation

Rethinking the Language Teacher's Role in the Technological Age

Introduction

In foreign language education, developing speaking skills is not purely a matter of choosing methods or technologies. The role of the teacher has undergone – and continues to undergo – a major transformation. According to the new expectations, language teachers must step back from the center of classroom interaction and reduce their own speaking time to make room for the development of students' communication skills (Kostadinovska-Stojchevska & Popovikj, 2019). Let's admit it: this shift is able to be emotionally taxing, as it runs counter to the traditional self-image of power, control, and visibility that is often central to the teaching profession. In this new pedagogical value system, pedagogical value no longer lies in the teacher's dominant presence. Instead, it lies in the teacher's ability to support students as active participants in communication. In this new language learning environment, however, as the teacher's role diminishes, access to authentic spoken language resources gets more and more valued. Interestingly, this phenomenon is not new: it has always been present in the history of language teaching, albeit to varying degrees. This historical perspective is interesting because it reveals that the technological and instrumental conditions – which often seem decisive in forming the pedagogical ecosystem – are secondary to pedagogical convictions. A good educator, a good language teacher, does not adapt their belief system to modern technology, but rather adapts modern technology to their belief system: they adapt the tool so that it serves didactic needs. If this were not the case, the burning issues of speech instruction would not continually emerge from the history of language education. Very few new tools have been able to permanently divert attention from the importance of live communication; one such example was the printed book, which understandably contributed to the rise of the grammar-translation method (Bárdos, 2025). However, the primacy of speech soon regained its dominance. It is interesting to note that, also in the early stages of sound recording, publications were already stimulating language learners to speak. Thus, the goal was never merely listening and comprehension, but the almost immediate translation of what was heard into practice.

Historical Perspective

Examining the historical development of language education not only enables an understanding of the emergence of contemporary language-teaching practices but also helps to see the legacy they carry. The methods employed in different historical periods reflect not only didactic solutions. They also reflect the cultural value systems, communicative norms, and conceptions of knowledge transmission characteristic of the societies in which they developed. The millennia-long history of language teaching is evidenced by the fact that bilingual dictionaries in the form of clay tablets have survived from the Sumerian civilization: the systematic learning and teaching of foreign languages constitutes one of the earliest layers of cultural heritage (Bárdos, 2025).

The language-pedagogical practices of the ancient Egyptians, as well as those of the Greeks and Romans, were likewise based on the primacy of orality. Through conquests and cultural encounters, these societies recognized that the acquisition of a foreign language was a means of gaining access to another culture, for which living, native speech provided the most authentic source. In societies where rhetorical knowledge and verbal intelligence were highly valued, speech-centred learning became established as a self-evident approach – one that persisted as a tradition over many centuries (Bárdos, 2025).

In the Middle Ages, with the widespread teaching of Latin, language learning became a mass phenomenon. Nevertheless, the primacy of orality persisted. In the early stages of increasingly formalized education, the teacher remained the primary source of knowledge transmission, as the scarcity of

books meant that grammatical instruction and translation practices were carried out largely through spoken interaction. Although the mass production of printed books introduced new proportions into the relationship between teacher and textbook, it nonetheless perpetuated the mindset of earlier models: the mediation of classical exemplars, the transmission of structured linguistic knowledge, and particular ways of conceptualizing the relationship to living speech (Schröder, 2018).

At the same time, historical analysis allows us to recognize that the legacy of speech-centred instruction – although it gradually lost some of its value – continues to function as a foundational principle in several language-pedagogical approaches throughout the centuries. The modern era, however, created a radically new situation. With the massification of language education, the situation changed fundamentally. The possibility for learners to acquire the target language naturally from native speakers has nearly disappeared. This was particularly true in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hungary, where the majority of language teachers never encountered native speakers of the languages they taught. As a result, their knowledge related to spoken language was mediated through their own non-native teachers and through phonetic instruction (Medgyes, 1997).

For this reason, the emergence of modern technology represents not merely a contemporary pedagogical tool. It also constitutes the continuation and reinterpretation of the historical legacy of access to native speech sources. The new technology not only revolutionized access to authentic audio materials but also created new pedagogical possibilities. While the legacy outlined at the beginning of the first chapter – the primacy of native speech, the demand for authentic linguistic sources – became core values of language teaching, technological development made it possible for these pedagogical principles to be realized in new practical forms (Gilmore, 2019). With the advent of sound recording, learners gained access for the first time to native speech that did not require the physical presence of the speaker, thereby opening the way for pedagogical tasks that could simulate real communication. When used well, digital tools can support language learning, but if not, they may simply distract students. Therefore, teachers should carefully prepare and conclude digital-based lessons with reflection or discussion, as technology is only a tool that requires informed pedagogical use (Móser & Szűts, 2023).

It is therefore worth taking a closer look at the material conditions that made access to authentic speech possible. Throughout the 20th century and into the early 21st century, new generations of audio technology not only left their mark on teaching practices but also radically transformed the way native-language speech was recorded and preserved. They also transformed the way these audio materials were shared with students. From early phonograph records and institutional language labs to later cassettes, CD-ROMs, and digital media, each new medium created new pedagogical possibilities. These tools did more than simply convey speech. They organized listening practice, enabled repetition, and went even further: they helped shape students' relationship with the spoken language (Salaberry, 2001).

The earliest, widely used educational audio media were 78-rpm records. These predated by far what we now know as “modern” vinyl records. These recordings represented the first large-scale technological tool that made spoken language accessible for educational purposes (Salaberry, 2001). Despite notable technical limitations, these recordings sought to convey the target language as naturally as possible using native-speaker speech samples. Their pedagogical value lay in the fact that they made authentic pronunciation and intonation accessible to students even without direct contact with the target language.

Alongside the use of audio recordings, magnetic tape technology also spread rapidly. In this early phase, language instruction generally relied on a single classroom tape recorder: the class listened to the model sentences together. Nevertheless, the technology represented a decisive change, as it allowed for the repeated listening of spoken language in unlimited quantities and for controlled listening practice – that is, the ability to pause the audio at any point. Magnetic tape also opened up new possibilities for language learning outside of institutional settings (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

By the early 1950s, the first tape-based language courses designed specifically for home use had appeared. A notable example was the French language course published by the Vermont-based Tape Correspondence School (Tape Recording magazine, 1958), which sought to meet the needs of independent learners. The dialogues on the recordings included pauses, leaving room for student responses, followed by model answers. These early publications made the first tentative steps in autonomous language learning possible.

The widespread diffusion of magnetic tape in the 1950s and 1960s directly paved the way for the emergence of language laboratories. They were created to solve a persistent weakness of traditional classrooms. Individual students simply had too little time to speak and practice the language themselves (Bárdos, 2025). In language labs, students could work individually with headphones, listen to recordings of native speakers, record their own voices, and compare their own speech with the target-language recordings. The teacher could monitor multiple students at the same time. The language lab thus became not simply a technical tool but also a unique pedagogical space that supported individualized and differentiated learning. At the same time, its most important feature was that it strengthened students' direct connection to authentic spoken language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

In the second half of the 20th century, sound recording technology kept evolving with the introduction of the compact cassette. Compared to earlier reel-to-reel systems, cassettes were more portable, more affordable, and more user-friendly. Language labs were primarily found inside educational institutions, but cassette technology made widespread home use possible. As a result, language learning expanded beyond schools and universities into everyday life. Learners were given the opportunity to take control of their own learning process: they could play back, pause, and rewind the recordings at will, at any time and for any duration. Such autonomy even more reinforced conversation-centred didactic approaches (Salaberry, 2001).

The cassette era of the 1970s and 1980s was followed by the rise of CD-ROM-based language learning programs in the late 1980s and 1990s. This transition marked a shift from analog, linear audio transmission to digital, programmable environments. Unlike cassettes, which offered only audio in a pre-recorded sequence, CD-ROMs integrated audio, text, images, and video. They also introduced branching structures that allowed learners to navigate using the keyboard. Although these programs were capable of recording and playing back the learner's speech, they were not yet able to understand or analyze it. Nevertheless, they represented the first real step toward interactive, computer-assisted language learning (Levy, 1997).

A significant qualitative leap occurred in interactivity with the development of speech recognition technologies, which moved from early systems limited to isolated words and a small vocabulary to increasingly sophisticated statistical approaches. Starting in the 2000s, advances in computing power and data availability transformed speech recognition into a large-scale, data-driven technology, trained on massive amounts of speech data and supported by cloud-based infrastructures.

Speech recognition first appeared in language learning software. It gave students feedback on how accurately they pronounced words. This was followed by web-based platforms and, later, mobile apps, which made speech practice portable and accessible anytime, anywhere. The result: live language interaction with digital systems has become part of students' daily lives. In recent years, technology has taken another leap forward: the combination of speech recognition and Large Language Models (specialized AI-systems) has created a new communication paradigm. Spoken input is no longer merely recorded and transcribed, but interpreted, contextualized, and responded to. As a result, today's AI-based systems are increasingly capable of simulating authentic conversational interaction (Juang & Rabiner, 2005).

From an educational standpoint, these technologies marked a genuine turning point. Earlier tools could only simulate human-to-human conversation, often in fairly limited ways, whereas modern systems,

by contrast, enable real verbal interaction and respond in real time. They can adapt learning paths to individual needs, which often helps sustain student motivation by offering consistent, data-driven evaluations of spoken performance. (Li et al., 2022). Overall, the historical development of these tools shows that there are ongoing, systemic efforts to preserve and expand access to authentic speech, even if the creation of the technology itself does not serve this purpose, at least not primarily. This is a secondary outcome, but for language teachers, it is also proof: the methods of language teaching from the past live on, speech-centred traditions remain with us; the only thing that changes is that we are following this path in increasingly modern and interactive forms.

Cultural Perspective

Technological shifts in the history of language education cannot be interpreted solely as innovations. These tools have always been embedded in the structures of collective memory that determine what a community considers valuable knowledge, which linguistic forms it preserves, and which communicative norms it passes on. Changes in language pedagogy can therefore be interpreted not only as processes in the history of education but also as processes of cultural memory.

Societies shape their self-image by transforming memories of the past into culture, thereby preserving their identity across generations. This process shapes not only collective history and institutionalized forms of memory, but also the pedagogical traditions through which knowledge is transmitted, including language education. The conversation-centred approach discussed in the previous chapter, the emphasis on authentic speech and input, and the changing role of the teacher all reflect how a society interprets itself: what it considers important in communication, what it chooses to preserve from the past, and how it approaches the transmission of knowledge (Assmann, 2011).

The history of language teaching is not merely a historical curiosity; it is a collection of established traditions that continue to shape teaching practices to this day. The focus on speaking and the importance of authentic sound are historical patterns that reflect a long-standing belief, rooted in collective experience, that language is, above all, spoken communication. The changing role of the teacher and the ongoing demand for authentic resources are also part of this tradition. This means that many of today's pedagogical decisions are not merely a response to current student needs or methodological expectations, but also a reflection of or adaptation to inherited cultural patterns.

However, this cultural heritage is not static, nor do traditions remain unchanged. Technological advances – from the printing press to sound recordings and later digital platforms – have repeatedly transformed the way student groups access authentic speech. However, the very belief that a true understanding of a language depends on access to authentic speech has been passed down for generations, even if the language teaching methods currently in vogue have not always made this their primary message (Gilmore, 2007). Today, regardless of language teaching methods, advances in media technology make access to authentic language materials widely and easily available, so the primacy of speech and communication is expected to continue to grow.

The fact that access to authentic language sources is of paramount importance is not merely a matter of language pedagogy. Indeed, the subtle nuances of meaning can only be expressed and interpreted if we know the language not only in a formal sense, but also through its use in natural contexts. In his work *Sense and Sensibilia* (1962), Pierre Bourdieu refers to this mode of language use as a “scholastic perspective”: a stance in which the speaker is able to step outside the everyday, situation-bound automatisms of meaning-making and consciously examine the full range of a word's possible semantic nuances. This type of semantic analysis is not merely a linguistic operation but a fundamental form of sophisticated thinking, as it allows us to approach language not merely as a tool of communication but also as a complex network of meanings. If language education does not provide access to authentic sources, it cannot foster the sensitivity that is indispensable for this kind of meaning analysis. For this reason, in addition to the rationale outlined above, access to authentic, spoken language materials has become a central element of modern language pedagogy: for it develops not only communicative skills

but also a conscious, reflective way of thinking about language – that kind of analytical and interpretive “playfulness” in the realm of meaning that Austin, and later Bourdieu, wrote about.

As Vygotsky famously put it, “the relationship between thought and word is not a thing but a process – a continuous back-and-forth movement between thought and word, and between word and thought.” This theory, which describes this dynamic, reciprocal relationship, also clearly demonstrates that language is not merely a tool, but also the medium that shapes thought. Even the ancients and medieval scholars –who sent their students to the target-language country – recognized that the finer nuances of thought emerge through the use of living language. Preserving access to authentic speech as a historical value is therefore consistent with Vygotsky’s views on the interdependence of thought and language development: linguistic nuances and conceptual precision are mutually dependent.

Vygotsky’s other fundamental principle – that every higher-order psychological function appears twice: first in the social sphere (interpsychological), and later internalized in individual consciousness (intrapsychological) – is directly linked to discourse-centred language teaching goals. This developmental path, from the social to the individual, emphasizes that linguistic competence does not develop in isolation but is shaped through interactions and real-life communicative situations. This explains why authentic audio materials, real-life communication contexts, and exposure to various accents and speech styles are indispensable in language learning: these provide the social space from which individual language use and internal cognitive processes can later emerge.

Discussion

Ultimately, all of this leads to another important conclusion. Precisely because contemporary technologies now provide unprecedented, direct, and widespread access to authentic language input, there is a greater need than ever for the teacher’s transformed presence. The abundance of language materials available through digital platforms, apps, and AI-powered tools does not in itself guarantee meaningful learning. On the contrary, the sheer volume of available input can easily overwhelm learners, fragment their attention, or expose them to language use that is not necessarily relevant for them to master. Learners, therefore, still need guidance in selecting appropriate materials, interpreting nuances of meaning, recognizing context, maintaining motivation, and transforming passive language exposure into purposeful communication.

We should therefore interpret the redefinition of the teacher’s role mentioned in the introduction not as a reduction in significance, but quite the opposite: as a more complex and pedagogically indispensable presence. While in earlier eras the teacher’s primary task was to provide access to rarely available linguistic models, in today’s learning environment, it is increasingly becoming central to help students navigate the world of abundance. The teacher remains indispensable as an organizer of interaction, a mediator of meaning, a source of feedback, and as a supporter capable of responding to the emotional, social, and developmental needs that no technology can fully replace. Especially in the development of speech skills, there is a need for encouragement, correction, dialogue, and trust – conditions that are fundamentally rooted in human relationships.

In the current technological age, therefore, teachers are needed not less, but in a different way: not as the sole transmitters of linguistic knowledge, but as professional guides who accompany students through increasingly complex communicative environments. What may at first glance appear to be a departure from tradition is, in fact, the renewed fulfillment of a long-standing pedagogical logic. Just as technology brings authentic language use closer to the learner, it remains the teacher’s enduring task to ensure that this access translates into genuine understanding, active participation, and actual communicative competence.

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Máté Kálmán STIFT & Mónika OROSZNÉ PERGER

Comparing Bachelor Students' Experiences at Two Engineering Faculties at BME (GPK vs. VIK)

Workload, Feedback, Practical Components, and Community

Introduction

Engineering programmes are often characterized by high academic demands, concentrated assessment periods, and intensive project work. Students' perceived manageability of workload, the clarity of expectations, the usefulness of feedback, and the availability of supportive peer communities can influence both academic progress and persistence (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1975). Even within the same institutional environment, different faculties may develop distinct assessment rhythms, course organization practices, and support cultures, which can result in systematically different student experiences.

This study compares bachelor students' perceptions at two BME faculties: GPK and VIK. The aim is not to rank faculties but to provide an interpretable, data-informed snapshot of where students report strengths and where development opportunities may exist. The paper focuses on five domains that students experience directly in everyday study life: workload and deadline pressure, teaching clarity and feedback, practical components, community integration and help-seeking, and overall satisfaction.

The relevance of the topic is practical as well as educational. In large engineering programmes, students' everyday experiences often function as an early signal of structural strengths and weaknesses. If high workload is paired with predictable organization, accessible support, and meaningful practical learning, students may still evaluate their studies positively. By contrast, the same nominal workload may be perceived much more negatively when deadlines accumulate, feedback is limited, or students do not feel supported by their environment. Comparing two faculties within the same university therefore offers a useful opportunity to identify patterns that may inform programme development.

Theoretical background

The theoretical background of the study draws on four closely connected areas of higher-education research: student engagement and persistence, workload perceptions, practical learning in engineering education, and the pedagogical role of feedback.

Student engagement and persistence. The literature on student involvement emphasizes that higher education is not merely a matter of curriculum delivery but also of how students invest time, energy, and attention into academic life (Astin, 1999). In this perspective, students are not passive recipients of knowledge; rather, their development depends on the intensity and quality of their participation in the educational environment. Closely related persistence models highlight that successful continuation in higher education depends not only on academic performance but also on social integration (Tinto, 1975). Students who feel connected to their peers and to the institutional environment are generally more likely to remain engaged, seek help when necessary, and interpret academic challenges as manageable rather than alienating. This is especially relevant in demanding engineering programmes, where strong peer networks may help students cope with difficult subjects and high assessment pressure.

Workload perceptions and timing. Student workload is a multidimensional construct. It is shaped not only by the amount of material or by the number of hours formally assigned to a course, but also by the timing, predictability, and transparency of tasks and deadlines (Kember, 2004). Two students may spend a similar number of hours on their studies yet report very different experiences of strain if one of them faces concentrated deadline peaks, unclear expectations, or sudden changes in assessment structure. Within the European higher-education framework, ECTS is intended to make workload more comparable and predictable by linking credits to estimated student effort (European Commission,

2015). In practice, however, perceived workload often depends on organizational and pedagogical factors that are not fully captured by formal credit values. This makes students' lived experience an important complement to curricular planning.

Practical learning in engineering education. Engineering education research has repeatedly shown that practice-oriented learning forms, including laboratories, projects, and authentic tasks, can improve engagement and strengthen students' sense of relevance and application (Prince, 2004; Freeman et al., 2014). Rather than functioning as mere supplements to theoretical teaching, such components often help students connect abstract concepts to professional contexts. In many engineering programmes, students report that these practical elements make learning more meaningful because they provide tangible experiences of problem solving, experimentation, and real-world application. High-impact educational practices, especially those that require active participation and sustained effort, are also associated with stronger developmental outcomes and more positive educational experiences (Kuh, 2008). In this sense, practical components may play a central role not only in skill formation but also in the way students evaluate the overall value of their programme.

Feedback as pedagogical support. Feedback is another key component of the student experience. Earlier pedagogical models already emphasized prompt feedback as one of the basic conditions of effective undergraduate education (Chickering and Gamson, 1987). More recent work has gone further by arguing that useful feedback is not simply information about past performance, but part of an ongoing learning dialogue in which students understand expectations, interpret comments, and use them to improve later work (Nicol, 2010). In large-scale higher education, this is often difficult to achieve consistently, yet the quality of feedback remains highly relevant for students' sense of fairness, progress, and academic orientation. When students perceive feedback as timely and meaningful, it may also contribute to a stronger sense of workload manageability by reducing uncertainty and helping them prioritize effort more effectively.

Taken together, these strands of research suggest that workload, practical learning, feedback, and community should not be interpreted as isolated factors. They are interconnected dimensions of the broader student experience, and their interaction may meaningfully shape how students evaluate their studies at different faculties.

Methods

Research questions and hypotheses

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do students at GPK and VIK differ in their perception of academic workload?
- How strongly are practical components related to overall satisfaction at the two faculties?
- What is the relationship between feedback, satisfaction, and perceived workload manageability?
- How is community integration associated with overall satisfaction?
- Does working alongside studies influence workload perception or modify the role of feedback?

Based on the literature reviewed above and on the practical context of engineering education, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: *Perceived workload pressure is high at both faculties, and the difference between GPK and VIK is at most moderate.*

H2: *The perceived usefulness of practical components is positively associated with overall satisfaction at both faculties.*

H3: Feedback is positively associated with both overall satisfaction and workload manageability.

H4: Stronger community integration is associated with more favourable overall satisfaction.

H5: Working alongside studies increases perceived workload pressure and weakens the relation-ship between feedback and satisfaction.

Design and participants

We conducted an anonymous, voluntary online survey among current bachelor students and recent graduates from GPK and VIK. After removing incomplete cases where all Likert-type items were missing, the final dataset included N = 166 responses (GPK: n = 96, VIK: n = 70). Working alongside studies was reported by 41.6% of participants. In terms of gender composition, 77.1% identified as male and 22.9% as female.

Instrument and measures

Most items were 5-point Likert statements (1 = not at all characteristic / strongly disagree; 5 = fully characteristic / strongly agree). We computed composite scales as item averages to represent key domains:

(i) workload manageability (3 items), (ii) workload pressure (2 items), (iii) teaching clarity and instructor support (3 items), (iv) feedback (2 items), (v) practical components (4 items), and (vi) community integration (3 items). Internal consistency of multi-item scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951).

Analysis

Faculty differences in workload pressure were tested with Mann–Whitney U tests, and practical significance was summarized via effect sizes (Cohen's d, Hedges' g). Associations between scales were assessed using Spearman rank correlations. To explore whether working alongside studies moderates relationships, correlations were computed separately for working vs. non-working subgroups and compared using Fisher's z-test.

Figure 1 — Internal consistency of composite scales (Cronbach's alpha)

Scale	Items	α
Workload manageability	3	0.524
Workload pressure	2	0.462
Teaching clarity & instructor support	3	0.640
Feedback	2	0.751
Practical components	4	0.673
Community integration	3	0.738

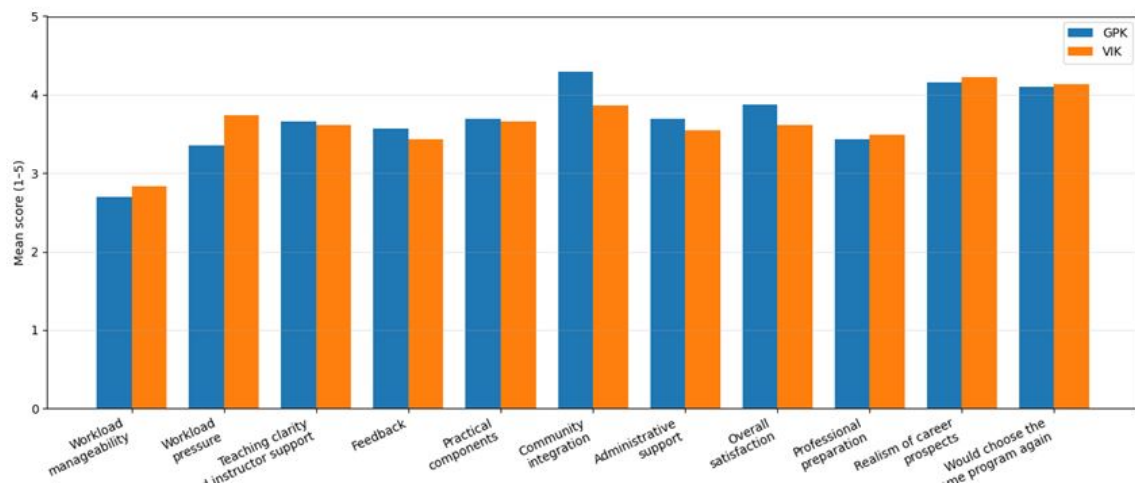
The internal consistency of the workload manageability ($\alpha = 0.524$) and workload pressure ($\alpha = 0.462$) scales is lower than that of the other composite measures. This can partly be explained by the relatively small number of items included in these scales (three items in the former case and two items in the latter), and also by the fact that the items capture different aspects of how academic workload is experienced by students, such as weekly workload, the evenness of the semester, deadlines, and exam-period pressure. Accordingly, these scales are interpreted as indicators in the subsequent analyses. They are retained because of their conceptual coherence and their relevance to the hypotheses, but they are not treated as fully developed psychometric scales.

Results

Descriptive overview

Figure 2. summarizes the mean values of the main scales by faculty. Students at both faculties report low-to-moderate workload manageability (below the midpoint), and high workload pressure. Teaching clarity and instructor support are rated moderately positively at both faculties. Practical components show consistently high perceived usefulness. Community integration is high overall, especially in the GPK subgroup.

Figure 2 — Mean scores of key scales by faculty (GPK vs. VIK)

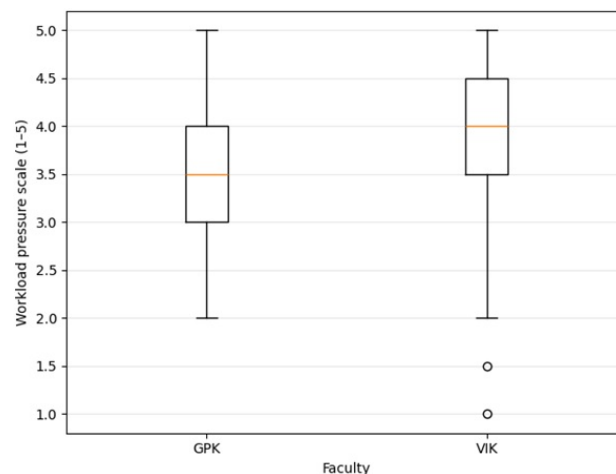


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H1: Faculty difference in workload pressure

Workload pressure is high at both faculties and significantly higher at VIK (Mann–Whitney $p = 0.0007$), with a medium effect size ($d = -0.473$, $g = -0.471$). The distribution by faculty is shown in Figure 3. This suggests that students at VIK experience stronger exam-period pressure and task accumulation compared to GPK respondents.

Figure 3 — Distribution of perceived workload pressure by faculty



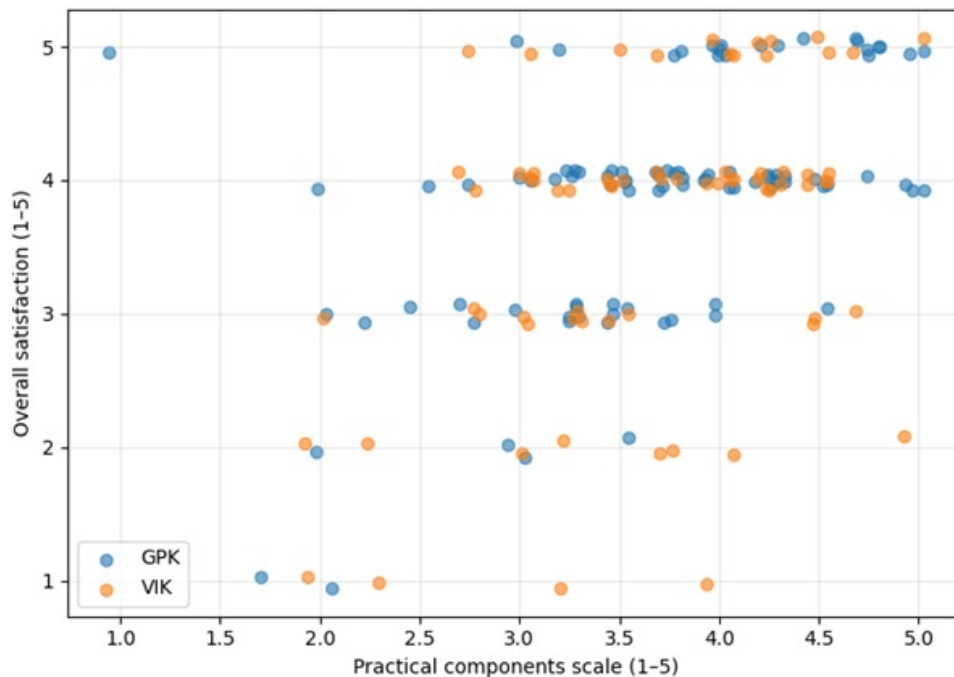
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H2: Practical components and overall satisfaction

Perceived usefulness of practical components is positively associated with overall satisfaction at both faculties (GPK: Spearman $r = 0.523$, $p < 0.001$; VIK: $r = 0.367$, $p = 0.0018$). This pattern supports the view

that labs and projects are not merely “extras” but meaningful contributors to the perceived value of the programme (Prince, 2004; Freeman et al., 2014; Kuh, 2008). See Figure 4.

Figure 4 — Practical components (usefulness) vs. overall satisfaction by faculty

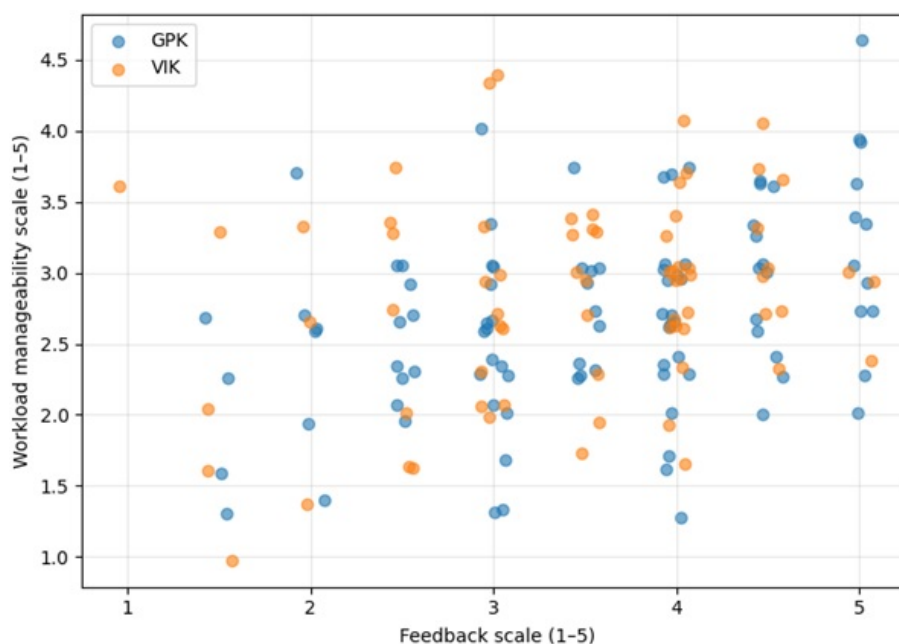


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H3: Feedback, satisfaction, and workload manageability

Feedback quality is positively related to overall satisfaction ($r = 0.455$, $p < 0.001$) and to workload manageability ($r = 0.300$, $p = 0.0001$). This aligns with the idea that usable feedback can help students navigate expectations and reduce uncertainty, which in turn supports a stronger sense of manageability (Nicol, 2010; Chickering and Gamson, 1987). The relationship is illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5 — Feedback vs. workload manageability (full sample)

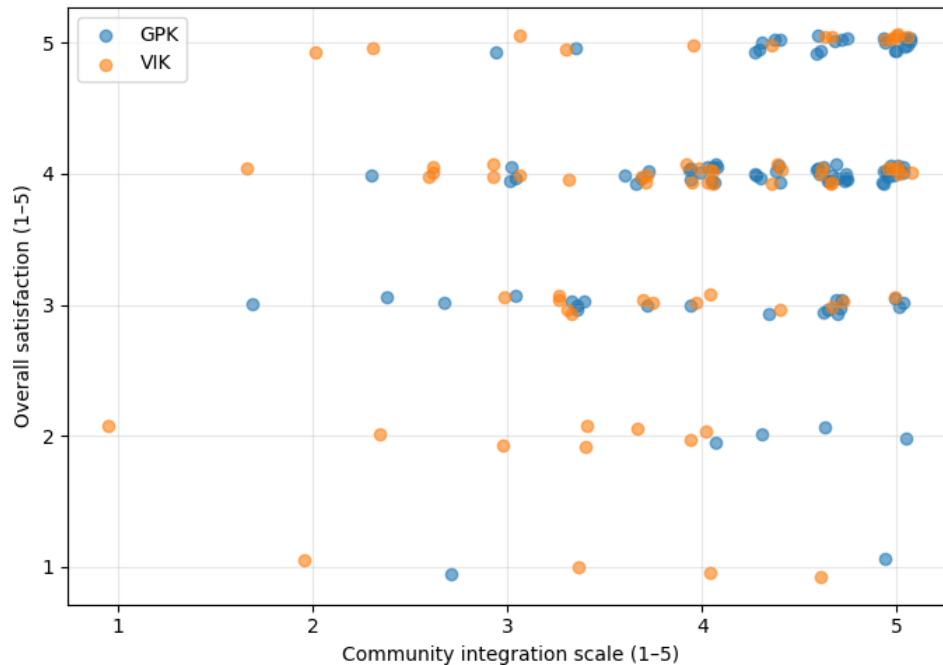


Source: own editing

H4: Community integration and overall satisfaction

Community integration is positively associated with satisfaction ($r = 0.308$, $p = 0.0001$). This finding is consistent with engagement and persistence frameworks emphasizing that social integration can support students under demanding academic conditions (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1975). See Figure 6.

Figure 6 — Community integration vs. overall satisfaction (full sample)



Source: own editing

H5: Working alongside studies

Working status does not increase workload pressure in this sample ($p = 0.8665$, $d = 0.031$, $g = 0.031$). However, working moderates how strongly feedback relates to satisfaction: the feedback–satisfaction correlation is stronger among non-working students ($r = 0.616$, $p < 0.001$) than among working students ($r = 0.164$, $p = 0.1776$), and the difference is significant (Fisher $z = 3.439$, $p = 0.0006$). A plausible interpretation is that for working students, external time constraints and life context may dominate satisfaction judgements, reducing the relative impact of feedback quality.

Figure 7 — Key hypothesis results (summary)

Hypothesis	Result (selected statistics)
H1	Workload pressure higher at VIK: $p = 0.0007$, $d = -0.473$, $g = -0.471$.
H2	Practical components vs. satisfaction: GPK $r = 0.523$, VIK $r = 0.367$ (both significant).
H3	Feedback vs. satisfaction: $r = 0.455$; feedback vs. manageability: $r = 0.300$ (both significant).
H4	Community vs. satisfaction: $r = 0.308$ (significant).
H5	Work vs. workload pressure: $p = 0.8665$ (no effect); moderation: Fisher $z = 3.439$, $p = 0.0006$.

Discussion and implications

The results suggest several practical implications.

Workload coordination. High workload pressure at both faculties, and especially at VIK, indicates that coordination of major deadlines and assessment peaks may meaningfully improve students' sense of

manageability (Kember, 2004; European Commission, 2015). Even small organizational changes can reduce unpredictability and clustering effects.

Strengthening practice-oriented elements. Practical components show consistently high perceived usefulness and a clear positive link with satisfaction. This supports continued investment in labs and projects, as well as clearer alignment between practical tasks and authentic engineering problems (Prince, 2004; Freeman et al., 2014; Kuh, 2008). Where feasible, linking practical tasks to explicit learning outcomes and professional contexts may strengthen the perceived value.

Feedback as a high-leverage mechanism. Feedback is related to both satisfaction and perceived manageability. In large courses, resource constraints often make detailed individual feedback difficult; however, structured approaches such as rubrics, worked examples, short targeted comments, and aggregated group feedback can still provide usable guidance (Nicol, 2010; Chickering and Gamson, 1987). The weaker feedback–satisfaction link among working students suggests that flexibility and accessibility of feedback formats may be particularly important for students with external time constraints.

Community integration. Community integration is associated with higher satisfaction, consistent with engagement and persistence frameworks (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1975). Supporting peer learning structures and visible help-seeking pathways may therefore contribute not only to well-being but also to persistence in demanding programmes.

Limitations and future work

The sample is convenience-based and not representative of all BME students. The design is cross-sectional, therefore causal interpretation is not warranted. Some scales are short and show lower internal consistency, especially workload-related measures, so they should be treated as concise indicators rather than as fully elaborated psychometric constructs. Future research could expand item pools, include additional faculties, and use longitudinal or mixed-method designs to better explain mechanisms behind perceived workload and satisfaction.

Conclusion

Bachelor students at both GPK and VIK report high workload pressure, with higher exam-period pressure at VIK. Practical components, feedback quality, and community integration are all associated with higher overall satisfaction. Working alongside studies does not increase workload pressure in this sample, but it moderates how strongly feedback relates to satisfaction. These findings point to actionable programme development directions: coordinated programme planning, strengthened feedback practices, and support for diverse student life contexts.

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How Higher Education Shapes Workplace Values

Evidence from Business and Economics and Technical Sciences Students

Introduction

One of the core tasks of higher education is to prepare students for the world of work, and that preparation extends beyond the transfer of technical knowledge. Academic programs differ not only in the knowledge they convey but also in the perspectives, values, and career expectations they encourage. The experiences students accumulate during their studies, together with the professional socialization associated with belonging to a particular academic community, may influence how they interpret workplace environments, organizational values, and employment conditions (Malin, 2022). Based on this, a degree program is not only a curriculum but also an environment where students begin to form a sense of professional identity and develop expectations regarding their future careers. This formative role is often overlooked when workplace preferences are treated solely as individual choices. Work-related values and expectations may also be associated with the educational and disciplinary environments in which they are developed. While a substantial body of research has examined what Generation Z expects from work, considerably less attention has been paid to how different academic fields and educational contexts may be reflected in those expectations. The present study addresses this gap by examining whether workplace expectations differ across fields of study and, if so, what these differences may reveal about the role of higher education in shaping work-related values and professional identities.

The present cohort of students transitioning from higher education to the labour market largely belongs to Generation Z, a group frequently described as placing importance on the meaning, ethics, and lifestyle implications of work in addition to material rewards. Previous studies suggest that, alongside traditional concerns such as salary and career advancement, members of this generation attach considerable importance to meaningful work, organizational purpose, sustainability, flexibility, and work–life balance. The disciplinary culture, professional identity, and labour market context associated with Business and Economics programmes differ from those associated with Technical Sciences programmes, and these differences may be reflected in distinct patterns of workplace expectations. Business and Economics education is often linked to competitiveness, efficiency, performance, and organizational success (Shebanin & Kormyshkin, 2019), whereas Technical Sciences education is more frequently associated with innovation, technological development, problem-solving, and sustainability-related challenges. Consequently, students enrolled in these programmes may develop different perspectives regarding organizational values, the purpose of work, and the factors that influence employment decisions.

Understanding these differences is important for both higher education institutions and employers. Universities are increasingly expected to prepare students not only with disciplinary knowledge but also with the skills, values, and expectations necessary for successful labour market integration. At the same time, employers face growing challenges in attracting and retaining Generation Z employees. Identifying how workplace expectations vary across academic fields may support curriculum development, career guidance initiatives, and university–industry cooperation, while also helping employers better understand the priorities of future graduates. From an educational perspective, examining these differences may also contribute to a better understanding of how disciplinary cultures and learning environments shape students' career-related value systems.

This paper investigates how students perceive the importance of organizational purpose and related values when choosing an employer and whether these perceptions differ between Business and Economics students and Technical Sciences students. More specifically, the study examines four dimensions

of workplace expectations: (1) the importance of organizational purpose in employer choice, (2) motivation derived from identifying with an organizational mission, (3) preferences regarding sustainability and financial rewards, and (4) preferences regarding organizational purpose and workplace flexibility. Drawing on the literature on purpose, organizational values, and professional identity development, the study examines how workplace expectations are associated with students' educational backgrounds and disciplinary contexts. Rather than treating workplace preferences exclusively as individual attitudes, the study approaches them as outcomes that may be associated with educational experiences and disciplinary socialization processes. By comparing students from two distinct academic fields, the study seeks to contribute to the growing literature on higher education, professional identity formation, and workplace values among Generation Z. The paper first reviews higher education as a value-shaping environment and the relevant literature on purpose, organizational purpose, and Generation Z workplace expectations. It then presents the empirical findings and discusses their implications for curriculum development, career guidance, and university–industry cooperation. These two disciplinary areas were selected because they represent educational environments characterized by substantially different professional cultures, labour-market pathways, and value orientations.

Within the Hungarian higher education context, increasing attention has been devoted to graduate employability and the alignment between educational outcomes and labour-market expectations.

Theoretical Background

Higher Education as a Value-Shaping Environment

Universities are commonly described in terms of what they teach, but their influence on students extends well beyond the formal curriculum. Through exposure to new perspectives, expanded social networks, and opportunities to pursue personally meaningful interests, higher education provides an environment in which students can explore and develop a sense of purpose (Malin, 2022). In addition to acquiring knowledge and competencies, students encounter new value systems, professional norms, and ways of understanding the world that may influence how they perceive work, organizations, and future career opportunities.

Beyond disciplinary knowledge acquisition, contemporary higher education is increasingly expected to support students' personal, professional, and career development. Student development theories emphasize that higher education influences not only cognitive growth but also the formation of values, aspirations, and future-oriented identities. Astin's (1993) theory of student involvement suggests that the quality and intensity of students' engagement with the university environment significantly shape developmental outcomes. Similarly, Tinto (1993) argues that students' academic and social integration within higher education institutions contributes not only to persistence and retention but also to the development of aspirations, identities, and future professional trajectories.

The concept of graduate employability has also become a central concern within higher education. Employability extends beyond obtaining employment and includes the development of knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and self-awareness that enable graduates to navigate increasingly complex labour market environments (Yorke, 2006). From this perspective, workplace expectations may be understood not merely as personal preferences but as outcomes of broader developmental and educational processes occurring during university studies.

A substantial part of this developmental process takes place through academic and professional socialization. Alongside formal learning experiences, students gradually absorb the norms, assumptions, expectations, and ways of thinking that characterize their academic communities. This process helps explain why graduates of different programs often leave university with different orientations toward work, not merely different skills (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001).

Building on this idea, Becher and Trowler (2001) describe academic disciplines as distinct communities with their own values, conventions, and ways of relating knowledge to practice. Through participation

in these disciplinary cultures, students gradually develop particular understandings of professional success, organizational responsibility, and the purpose of work itself. Consequently, workplace expectations may reflect not only individual preferences but also the educational and disciplinary environments in which those preferences have developed.

This perspective is particularly relevant when comparing students from different academic fields. If higher education contributes to the formation of professional identities, workplace values, and career expectations, differences observed between disciplinary groups may provide valuable insights into the role of educational environments in shaping future graduates' orientations toward work.

Purpose as a Construct

Purpose has been defined as an aspect of psychological well-being marked by a sense of directedness in life and the presence of aims and objectives for living (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Malin (2022) treated purpose as a multi-layered construct and distinguished three dimensions whose extent and content vary from person to person: the significant goal someone hopes to achieve, the motivation that comes from sources beyond the self, and the steps the person takes to fulfil that goal. From this perspective, people are not simply high or low in purpose. Each individual has a distinct purpose profile that combines the content of their intentions, the reasons behind them, and the effort they put into pursuing them. This individual-centred focus matters here because it implies that the way purpose is expressed in workplace expectations may also differ in patterned ways across groups of students.

From the position of positive psychology, which studies human strengths and well-being to understand the adaptive and satisfying sides of behaviour (Compton & Hoffman, 2020), a sense of purpose in life is treated as a major asset for health and well-being (Windsor et al., 2015). Research has repeatedly linked a sense of purpose with positive affect, resilience, and motivation (Hill et al., 2010; Sharma, Kim, & Bernal-Arevalo, 2021; Windsor et al., 2015). Among university students, a sense of purpose predicts degree commitment, institutional commitment, and academic identity, and is related to real progress toward a degree, as measured by grade point average, academic standing, and first-year retention (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2023). It has also been tied to resilience and persistence among college students during periods of disruption (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2022).

Yukhymenko-Lescroart (2024) described purpose orientations along three dimensions that capture what people are oriented toward as they pursue their goals: career-focused, self-growth-oriented, and others growth-oriented. For students, a career-focused orientation aligns closely with finishing their studies, as dedication to study is the route through which longer-term career goals are reached. These orientations matter for the present argument because they foreshadow the values that students may carry into the workplace. A career-focused orientation may stress advancement and security, a self-growth orientation may stress learning and flexibility, and an others' growth orientation may stress social responsibility and contribution, the last of which maps onto sustainability and purpose-driven employer missions.

From Individual Purpose to Organizational Purpose

Based on the literature discussed above, we move from purpose as an individual resource to organizational purpose and values through which an organization explains why it exists and what it contributes beyond profit. For students entering the labour market, organizational purpose works as a signal that can attract or repel prospective employees; the degree to which a clear and compelling purpose influences employer choice is itself a measure of how far purpose-related values have been internalized. Motivation and engagement tend to be higher when employees identify with the mission of the organization they join. This study treats both the perceived influence of organizational purpose and the motivation drawn from identifying with a company's mission as observable expressions of that alignment, and it reads the strength of these responses as partly a product of what students have learned to value during their studies.

Generation Z and Workplace Expectations

The group now entering the labour market is often portrayed as ranking meaning, ethics, and quality of life alongside material reward very highly. Four dimensions are particularly relevant in this context. The first is organizational purpose itself, where the extent to which a clear mission shapes employer choice and workplace motivation. The second is sustainability and social responsibility, which is the expectation that an employer should act responsibly toward society and the environment. The third is flexibility, understood as the ability to shape one's own working conditions, which has become a prominent expectation in contemporary work settings. The fourth is financial security, a practical concern with pay and stability that continues to anchor career decisions. A central question is how students weigh these dimensions against one another when they cannot all be satisfied at once, for example, sustainability against salary or purpose against flexibility. Generation Z is commonly defined as those born between 1995 and 2010 (Steigervald, 2020), and it is this group that we address this.

Academic Field as a Source of Workplace Value Differences

Field of study is a plausible area of variation in workplace expectations because disciplines cultivate distinct professional identities and point students toward different parts of the labor market. The argument is not simply that the two groups differ, but that their educational environments help produce these differences. Business Economics programs are closely tied to commercial, profit-oriented settings in which financial performance and market logic are prominent, and a curriculum built around competitiveness and organizational success may foster a comparatively pragmatic measurement of salary and security. Technical sciences programs, by contrast, are often connected to applying problem-solving skills and to sectors in which sustainability, innovation, and societal contribution are increasingly treated as core challenges, which may encourage greater openness to purpose and sustainability-related roles. Disciplinary socialization offers a way of understanding this, such that as students are drawn into the norms and concerns of their field (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Weidman et al., 2001), they absorb a sense of what work is for, and that sense is reflected in what they later expect from an employer. These contrasting contexts motivate the central comparison of the study and the expectation that the two groups will differ in how they measure purpose and sustainability against certain concerns, even as flexibility and financial security remain important to both.

Research Objectives and Questions

Research on workplace preferences has long focused on financial incentives, especially salary and advancement. More recently, attention has shifted toward non-financial factors such as meaningful work, organizational purpose, sustainability, and flexibility, which appear to play a growing part in the employment decisions of Generation Z. Much less is known about how these values and expectations differ across students in different fields of higher-education. Because academic programs expose students to distinct professional cultures, value systems, and career pathways, it is reasonable to assume that students from different disciplines evaluate workplace characteristics differently.

The study therefore, explores how these differences can be observed between Business Economics students and Technical Sciences students based on the importance they attach to organizational purpose, sustainability, workplace flexibility, and financial considerations, and to interpret those differences considering the educational environments that may have shaped them. Three research questions guided this inquiry:

- **RQ1.** Are there differences between Business and Economics students and Technical Sciences students in the perceived importance of organizational purpose for employer choice and work motivation?
- **RQ2.** Do Business and Economics students and Technical Sciences students differ in their preferences when faced with trade-offs between sustainability-related values and financial considerations?

- **RQ3.** Are there differences between the two groups in the relative importance assigned to organizational purpose and workplace flexibility?

Methodology

The study is based on a questionnaire survey conducted among Hungarian higher education students. Data were collected through an online questionnaire between August and September 2025. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Unified Psychological Research Ethics Committee. All procedures complied with the requirements regarding informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and data protection.

Following data cleaning, the final sample consisted of 709 valid responses. All respondents belonged to Generation Z, defined in this study as individuals born between 1995 and 2010 (Steigervald, 2020), and were enrolled in Hungarian higher education institutions at the time of data collection, either in full-time or part-time study programmes. As all participants were actively engaged in higher education, the sample provides an appropriate context for examining how workplace expectations emerge during the transition from education to employment.

Higher education represents a particularly important stage in the development of professional identities, career aspirations, and work-related values. Students are exposed not only to disciplinary knowledge but also to professional norms, expectations, and value systems associated with their chosen fields of study. Consequently, university students provide a relevant population for investigating how educational environments may be associated with differences in workplace expectations. The main characteristics of the sample are presented in Figure 1. The final dataset consisted of 709 respondents, with a relatively balanced gender distribution (53% female and 47% male). Regarding field of study, Business and Economics students represented the largest subgroup (74%), followed by students from Technical Sciences (19%), while respondents from other academic fields accounted for 7% of the sample. The vast majority of participants were enrolled in full-time programmes (97%), indicating that the findings primarily reflect the workplace expectations of students actively participating in campus-based higher education. Consequently, the results may provide useful insights for higher education institutions seeking to understand and support the career expectations and value orientations of students during their studies.

Figure 1 — Sample Characteristics

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	334	47
	Female	375	53
Field of Study	Business and Economics	524	74
	Technical Sciences	132	19
	Other	53	7
Study Mode	Full-time	691	97
	Part-time	18	3

As the study focuses on students who are currently participating in higher education and preparing to enter the labour market, the findings offer insights into the expectations and value orientations of future graduates at a particularly important stage of career development. Although the distribution across fields of study was not even, both Business and Economics and Technical Sciences were represented by sufficiently large groups to allow meaningful statistical comparisons.

Measures

The analysis focuses on four dimensions of workplace expectations that are frequently discussed in the literature on Generation Z and career preferences. These dimensions were selected because they

represent key workplace values frequently associated with Generation Z and are closely linked to contemporary discussions on organizational purpose, sustainability, and career decision-making. First, respondents evaluated the extent to which a clear and inspiring organizational purpose influences their choice of employer. Second, they indicated whether they would be more motivated if they could identify with the mission of their employer. Third, respondents expressed their preferences when faced with a trade-off between sustainability-related values and higher financial compensation. Finally, they were asked to choose between organizational purpose and workplace flexibility as competing workplace characteristics.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the characteristics of the sample and the distribution of responses. To examine differences between Business and Economics students and Technical Sciences students, cross-tabulation analyses and Pearson's chi-square tests were performed for categorical variables. Cramer's V was calculated to assess the strength of significant associations. For the Likert-scale measure examining the influence of organizational purpose on employer choice, independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare group means. For all analyses, statistical significance was evaluated at the 5% significance level ($p < .05$).

The analysis focused on identifying differences in workplace values and expectations across disciplinary groups rather than establishing causal relationships between educational experiences and workplace preferences. The findings were interpreted as reflecting associations between educational contexts and workplace expectations, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the relationship between higher education and the development of work-related values. It should be noted that the study does not directly measure disciplinary socialization processes, professional identity development, or specific educational experiences. Consequently, interpretations concerning the influence of educational environments should be understood as theoretically informed explanations rather than empirically verified causal mechanisms. The findings therefore provide evidence of associations between educational contexts and workplace values, while the underlying developmental processes require further investigation.

Results

This section presents the results of the comparative analyses between Business and Economics students and Technical Sciences students. The findings are organized around the three research questions and the four dimensions of workplace expectations examined in the study.

Organizational Purpose and Work Motivation (RQ1)

The first research question examined whether Business and Economics students and Technical Sciences students differ in the importance they attach to organizational purpose when choosing an employer. An independent-samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups regarding the influence of organizational purpose on employer choice, $t(654) = -1.995$, $p = .046$. Students from Technical Sciences reported a slightly stronger influence of organizational purpose ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.51$) than students from Business and Economics ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.40$). However, the effect size was small (Cohen's $d = 0.19$), suggesting that the difference, while statistically significant, was modest in practical terms.

A significant association was also found between field of study and motivation derived from identifying with an organizational mission ($\chi^2 = 20.17$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .119$). Business and Economics students were somewhat more likely to report that they would be more motivated if they could identify with their employer's mission (77.9%) than Technical Sciences students (72.7%). Conversely, Technical Sciences students were more likely to indicate that organizational purpose would not increase their motivation (15.2% vs. 7.8%). The strength of the association was weak.

Taken together, the findings provide only partial support for the assumption that Technical Sciences students are more purpose-oriented than Business and Economics students. While Technical Sciences students reported a slightly stronger influence of organizational purpose on employer choice, Business and Economics students were somewhat more likely to indicate that identification with an organizational mission would increase their work motivation. These results suggest that different aspects of organizational purpose may be interpreted differently across disciplinary groups, highlighting the potential role of educational contexts in shaping how purpose is understood and expressed.

Sustainability and Financial Considerations (RQ2)

The second research question examined whether Business and Economics students and Technical Sciences students differ in their preferences when choosing between a socially responsible and sustainable employer and an employer offering higher financial compensation.

A statistically significant association was found between field of study and these preferences ($\chi^2 = 43.31$, $df = 6$, $p < .001$). The strength of the association was weak to moderate (Cramer's $V = .175$).

Business and Economics students were more likely to prioritize financial considerations, with 49.0% indicating that salary-related factors were more important than sustainability-related considerations. Among Technical Sciences students, this proportion was lower (37.9%). Conversely, Technical Sciences students were more than twice as likely to choose a sustainable and socially responsible employer (15.9%) than Business and Economics students (6.5%). At the same time, a considerable proportion of respondents in both groups indicated that sustainability and financial compensation were equally important (42.7% among Business and Economics students and 44.7% among Technical Sciences students). Only a small minority reported that neither factor would influence their decision.

These findings indicate that Technical Sciences students demonstrate greater openness toward sustainability-related considerations, whereas Business and Economics students place greater emphasis on financial rewards when evaluating potential employers.

Organizational Purpose and Workplace Flexibility (RQ3)

The third research question examined whether Business and Economics students and Technical Sciences students differ in the relative importance they assign to organizational purpose and workplace flexibility.

A statistically significant association was found between field of study and preferences regarding organizational purpose and workplace flexibility ($\chi^2 = 22.18$, $df = 6$, $p = .001$). The strength of the association was weak (Cramer's $V = .125$).

Business and Economics students were considerably more likely to prioritize workplace flexibility, with 59.0% selecting this option compared to 43.2% of Technical Sciences students. In contrast, Technical Sciences students were more than twice as likely to prioritize organizational purpose (22.7%) than Business and Economics students (9.4%). Similar proportions of respondents in both groups indicated that organizational purpose and workplace flexibility were equally important (29.4% and 30.3%, respectively).

These findings suggest that Technical Sciences students place relatively greater emphasis on organizational purpose when evaluating potential employers, whereas Business and Economics students tend to assign greater importance to workplace flexibility.

Overall, the findings reveal both common and discipline-specific workplace expectations among Generation Z students. While flexibility and financial security remained important across both groups, differences emerged regarding the relative importance of organizational purpose and sustainability. These patterns suggest that workplace values may be associated with students' disciplinary backgrounds and educational contexts.

Discussion

The comparison in this study should not be understood simply as a contrast between two groups of students, but rather as an opportunity to explore how educational environments may contribute to the development of work-related values. If Technical Sciences students show comparatively greater openness toward organizational purpose and sustainability, and Business and Economics students place somewhat greater weight on financial considerations, the more interesting question is why this happens. The finding above is in tandem and rooted in academic socialization and disciplinary culture rather than in individual temperament alone (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Malin, 2022).

The findings may reflect differences in disciplinary cultures and professional socialization processes operating within higher education environments. Technical Sciences education increasingly frames technological development in relation to societal and environmental challenges. Students are taught to view energy, infrastructure, and design problems as bound up with questions of responsibility and long-term consequences. It would be surprising if this framing left no mark on how they think about their employers. A graduate accustomed to treating sustainability as a technical and ethical problem may expect an employer to take the same questions seriously. Business and Economics education, with its emphasis on competitiveness, efficiency, and organizational performance, offers a different vocabulary for thinking about work, one in which financial soundness and market position are foregrounded. A comparatively pragmatic weighting of salary and security among these students is consistent with the values their programs tend to reinforce.

At the same time, the findings suggest that organizational purpose should not be interpreted as a simple characteristic that is either present or absent within a disciplinary group. The results related to organizational purpose were more nuanced. Technical Sciences students reported a stronger influence of organizational purpose on employer choice and were more likely to prioritize purpose over workplace flexibility. However, Business and Economics students were somewhat more likely to report that identifying with an organizational mission would increase their work motivation. This suggests that organizational purpose may be expressed differently across educational contexts. For some students, purpose appears primarily as a motivational resource, whereas for others it is reflected more strongly in concrete employment preferences and career-related trade-offs.

Reading the results in this way changes their meaning. Rather than treating a stronger preference for purpose as a fixed trait of technical sciences students, we can treat it as partly a product of their education, and therefore as something that universities can influence. The same logic applies to the dimensions on which the two groups resemble each other. The fact that flexibility and financial security matter to both suggests that some expectations belong to the generation rather than the discipline. These are the concerns Generation Z brings to the labor market regardless of field (Steigervald, 2020), forming a common foundation upon which more discipline-specific values are built. The stronger sustainability orientation observed among Technical Sciences students further supports this interpretation, suggesting that educational environments may shape not only technical competencies but also broader value preferences related to social and environmental responsibility.

From the perspective of higher education, these findings are particularly relevant because they indicate that workplace values are not entirely independent from the educational contexts in which students develop their professional identities. Universities do not merely transfer disciplinary knowledge; they also provide frameworks through which students interpret work, organizational values, and career opportunities. Consequently, higher education institutions may play an important role in fostering reflection on sustainability, organizational purpose, and the broader social implications of professional work.

The work on purpose orientations implies that students differ in whether they are oriented primarily toward career, self-growth, or contribution to others (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2024), and that these orientations take shape during university years. If a sense of purpose supports degree commitment

and persistence (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2023), and if disciplinary environments channel that purpose in particular directions, then the workplace expectations students hold at graduation are the visible end of a longer process that began when they entered their programs. These findings suggest that the role of higher education extends beyond knowledge transmission and may also involve the development of workplace values, purpose orientations, and professional identities that influence students' future career expectations.

Educational Implications

The findings suggest that workplace values should be considered not only labour-market outcomes but also educational outcomes emerging during students' participation in higher education. If workplace values are shaped in part by educational environments, then universities are not bystanders to the patterns observed in this study. They are among the forces that produce them, which means the findings carry valid implications for how higher education institutions prepare students for the labor market.

The first concern is curriculum design. If Technical Sciences programs cultivate openness to sustainability and purpose largely because those themes are built into the curriculum, then Business and Economics programs could do something similar by giving more room to questions of organizational purpose, ethics, and social responsibility. The aim would not be to dilute the financial and analytical strengths of the field but to broaden the vocabulary students use when they think about what an organization stands for. Embedding purpose and sustainability-related content across both kinds of programs would help align graduates in the labor market, where these expectations are becoming standard rather than exceptional.

The second focuses on career guidance and counselling. Students leave university with different orientations toward work, and generic advice most of the time serves them poorly. Career services that recognize the developmental and disciplinary roots of these orientations can help students articulate what they want from an employer, including the weight they place on purpose, sustainability, flexibility, and security. Purpose-oriented career counselling, which encourages students to connect their personal sense of meaning with concrete employment choices, fits naturally with the evidence that purpose supports both well-being and resilience (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2022; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2023). The findings of the present study also suggest that organizational purpose may not be expressed in the same way across disciplinary contexts. While some students appear to value purpose primarily as a source of motivation, others express purpose-related orientations through sustainability preferences or their willingness to prioritize organizational purpose in employment-related trade-offs. Consequently, educational initiatives aimed at fostering purpose should recognize that purpose may take different forms across academic fields rather than assuming a single, uniform orientation.

The third concern is employability and the relationship between universities and employers. Graduates who are motivated by identifying with a mission are an asset to organizations that take purpose seriously. The results indicate that purpose remains an important consideration for students across both disciplinary groups, although its relative importance differs depending on the employment decision being considered. Employers seeking to attract Generation Z graduates may therefore benefit from communicating not only organizational goals and social impact but also how these values are reflected in everyday work practices, flexibility arrangements, and career opportunities. Universities can strengthen this match through closer cooperation with industry, placements, and projects that expose students to purpose-driven organizations, and by helping employers understand what this generation of graduates is looking for. The idea is not to manage expectations downward but to prepare both sides for a labour market in which meaning and responsibility increasingly sit alongside pay and stability.

Finally, the shared concerns of the two groups deserve their own attention. Because flexibility and financial security matter across fields, institutions, and employers alike would do well to treat them as baseline expectations rather than perks. For universities, this means being honest with students about working conditions and helping them realistically weigh trade-offs. For employers, this means

recognizing that flexibility and security are now part of what makes any role attractive to early career graduates.

The findings raise the question of whether purpose development should be considered an explicit educational objective within higher education programmes. If workplace values and career expectations are partly shaped during university years, institutions may have a role not only in preparing students for employment but also in supporting reflection on the meaning and social impact of professional work.

Conclusion

This study sets out to understand why Business and Economics students and Technical Sciences students differ in what they expect from future employers, and to examine those differences through the role of higher education in shaping work-related values. There are expectations the two groups share, flexibility and financial security among them, which seem to belong to Generation Z. Above, there are discipline-specific tendencies, with Technical Sciences students comparatively more drawn to purpose and sustainability, and Business and Economics students comparatively more focused on financial considerations. This reflects the distinct cultures and socialization patterns cultivated in different academic fields (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Malin, 2022).

At the same time, the findings suggest that organizational purpose may be expressed differently across disciplinary contexts. While Technical Sciences students were more likely to prioritize purpose and sustainability in employment-related trade-offs, Business and Economics students were more likely to report that identification with an organizational mission would increase their motivation. This indicates that purpose is not a uniform construct but may be interpreted and enacted in different ways depending on educational and professional contexts.

If universities help shape how students value work, they can also help shape it more deliberately through curricula that broaden the questions students ask about organizations, career guidance attentive to purpose, and closer ties with employers who share these commitments. Preparing graduates for the present labor market means attending not only to what they know but to what they have learned to value. Higher education is uniquely positioned to take on this task.

The study is subject to several limitations. The sample was drawn from Hungarian higher education students and was dominated by full-time students, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the research does not allow causal conclusions to be drawn regarding the influence of higher education on workplace values and expectations. The unequal representation of disciplinary groups should also be considered when interpreting the findings. An additional limitation is that the study relies on field of study as a proxy for educational environment. Although disciplinary differences may reflect distinct socialization processes and professional cultures, the present research did not directly assess students' educational experiences, curricular exposure, or professional identity development. Future research should incorporate measures of disciplinary socialization, purpose development, and employability-related learning experiences to better understand the mechanisms through which higher education may influence workplace values and career expectations.

Future research could extend this work by examining a broader range of academic disciplines, comparing students and graduates at different career stages, or employing longitudinal designs to explore how workplace values and purpose orientations develop over time. Such studies could contribute to a deeper understanding of how higher education and professional socialization interact in shaping the work-related values of future generations.

Acknowledgement

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Gerald KORIR & Chidimma Ngozi OKAFOR

Toward a Process-Oriented Model of Educational Service Delivery in Higher Education

Integrating BPM, ISO 9001:2015, and ESG Frameworks

Introduction

Higher education institutions face growing pressure to demonstrate quality, efficiency, and accountability to students, employers, accreditation bodies, and public funders. In policy, this is seen in frameworks like the ESG (ENQA, 2015) and in quality management standards such as ISO 9001:2015, which more European universities now use alongside ESG compliance (Becket & Brookes, 2006; Branković et al., 2022). Despite these regulations, most HEIs have low process maturity, especially in areas where processes are often undocumented, customers are not identified, and measurement systems are basic or absent (Trkman, 2010; Antunes & Pinho, 2020). As a result, quality assurance is mostly about compliance, with improvement as an afterthought, and the true benefits of the process approach not realized.

Research on process management and higher education quality is increasing but remains fragmented. One line of research examines how ISO 9001 can operationalize ESG standards at the institutional level (Branković et al., 2022; Steed, 2015). These studies find that ISO 9001's process approach provides a practical foundation for ESG requirements, though full alignment is rare. Šliž et al. (2022) and Mendonça et al. (2023) assessed BPM methods such as governance, modeling, and process identification in the public sector and higher education. They argued that BPM governance helps institutions respond more effectively but found significant cultural and structural resistance in academia. Calvo-Mora et al. (2015) examined the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM)-based self-assessment to measure institutional process capability. The authors highlight leadership and stakeholder focus as essential, while noting fragmented ownership and resistance to measurement as barriers. These authors identify a missing link in this integrative model: one that combines BPM, ISO 9001, and ESG into a single framework – a framework that is process-oriented for the academic and service roles of higher education institutions.

The main research question is: *How can process management, ISO 9001:2015, and ESG principles be combined into a clear, process-based model of service delivery that fits how universities work and teach?*

This paper uses an integrative conceptual approach, synthesizing HE management literature to develop a model that organizes institutional activities into core educational processes, support services, and governance, each embedded in the PDCA cycle to support continuous improvement. This paper explains where BPM, ISO 9001:2015, and ESG differ and converge, providing a clear basis for harmonization. It introduces a theoretically based, traceable process architecture for HEIs and demonstrates how the proposed model and institutions will help align practices with recognized frameworks.

The next sections of the paper are as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical foundations and covers process maturity in HEIs, the BPM capability framework, and the relationship between ISO 9001 and ESG. Section 3 presents the three process layers and the proposed model. Section 4 discusses the implications for institutional practice and research. Section 5 concludes with limitations and directions for future empirical work.

Theoretical Foundations

Process Approach and Process Maturity in Higher Education

Hammer & Champy (1993) and Rosemann & vom Brocke (2010) argued that value is created through a series of connected activities that cross organizational boundaries, rather than within individual departments or silos, which they describe as the process approach in organizations. Various studies

indicate that BPM applies this idea by organizing, monitoring, carrying out, and improving processes to achieve strategic goals (Bandara et al., 2007; Trkman, 2010). While BPM started as a way to address industry inefficiencies, it is now also used in public organizations like universities, where clear processes help manage complex outputs and diverse stakeholders (Šliž et al., 2022).

Trkman (2010) notes that BPM requires process documentation, performance measurement, and customer identification, but these are rarely found in academic settings. Applying BPM in higher education faces a major challenge where most institutions have low process maturity. Antunes & Pinho (2020) confirm that processes are often informal, ownership is split between faculties and administrative units, and measurement systems, if present, focus on compliance rather than improvement. Mendonça et al. (2023) emphasized that existing models do not capture the dual academic and service-oriented character of HEIs, making it difficult to transfer BPM frameworks directly from commercial to theoretical settings. Quality assurance obligations, emphasized in frameworks like ESG and ISO 9001, have not led to genuine improvements in process capability across the sector because of these structural deficits.

Based on these arguments, successful process management in higher education depends on shared ownership, leadership commitment, and reliable data (Calvo-Mora et al., 2015; Branković et al., 2022). Barriers include resistance to management ideas, unclear accountability, and missing process documentation (Steed, 2015; Šliž et al., 2022). In higher education, these factors show that BPM approaches must be tailored to the unique structure and culture of academic institutions.

ISO 9001:2015 and ESG: Convergence and Divergence.

ISO 9001:2015 and the ESG Standards and Guidelines (See Appendix A1) have shaped quality management practices in European higher education. ISO 9001:2015 is a quality management standard that can be used across various sectors. It is based on seven principles that focus on processes and continuous improvement. Organizations using this model define their inputs, outputs, responsibilities, performance indicators, and improvement methods, creating a clear operational structure (ISO, 2015). The ESG, on the other hand, is made specifically for European higher education. While ISO 9001 is broad, ESG has three parts: internal quality assurance (Part 1), external quality assurance (Part 2), and governance of quality assurance agencies (Part 3). This paper focuses only on ESG Part 1, which covers ten standards for internal quality management, including student support, program design, teaching staff, regular review, and information management (ENQA, 2015).

Researchers have different views on how these frameworks relate. Branković et al. (2022) proposed that using ISO 9001 in a meaningful way, not just for compliance, helps build the systems needed for ESG. This happens through documentation, process monitoring, and stakeholder feedback. Steed (2015) states that ISO 9001's focus on clear processes and measurable goals helps put ESG principles into practice. Still, both studies point out important differences. ISO 9001's focus on customer satisfaction and risk management does not align with the values of intellectual inquiry, broad education, and shared governance. Syed et al. (2018) raises concern that using the ISO 9001 standard without careful consideration will reduce educational quality to formal compliance and simple measures, and weaken the peer-review process meant to keep standards high. However, while they share similarities, ISO 9001 and ESG have different priorities.

Figure 1 — Comparative Analysis of ISO 9001:2015 and ESG (Part 1) in the HEI Context

Dimension	ISO 9001:2015	ESG Part 1
Scope	Universal QMS, any sector	Quality assurance in HEIs
Core principle	Process approach and continuous improvement	Student-centered learning and quality enhancement
Improvement cycle	PDCA (explicit)	PDCA (implicit, via Standards 1.9–1.10)
Stakeholder focus	Customer (general)	Students, staff, employers, society (specified)
Documentation	Documented processes, workflow discipline, and controls required	Transparency and self-assessment required
Performance indicators	Defined and measured at process, output, and outcome levels	Informational (data) use for monitoring and decision-making (1.7)
Risk approach	Explicitly required	Encouraged but not formalized
External validation	Third-party audit and certification	External review by national QA agencies
Tension points	Efficiency logic may conflict with academic culture	Abstraction may limit operational specificity

Source: Authors' synthesis based on ISO (2015), ENQA (2015), Branković et al. (2022), and Steed (2015).

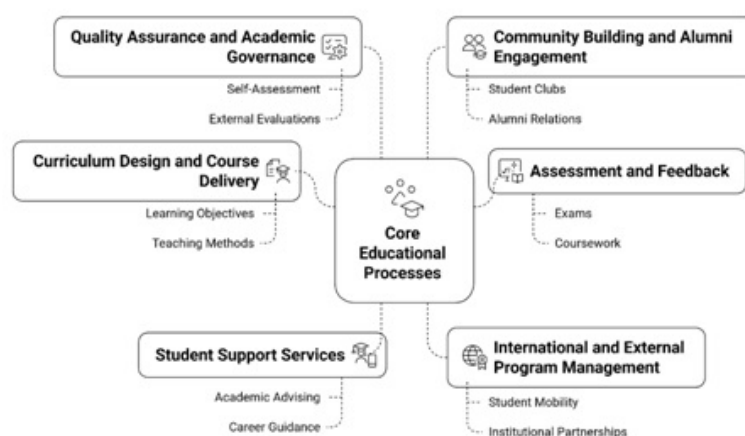
Both frameworks (see Figure 1) use a continuous improvement approach based on the PDCA cycle (Deming, 1986), which makes them structurally compatible with BPM's process improvement philosophy (Santana et al., 2011). To integrate these frameworks (Figure 1), a mediating model is needed to translate their logic into a process architecture that improves quality in higher education.

Educational Service Delivery as a System of Processes

Drawing on ideas from service management theory and BPM, we see educational service delivery as a system of processes rather than just a set of separate academic tasks (i.e., admission, lectures, final examination). The service-dominant logic view (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) suggests that value is co-created by the institution and the student, not simply given by one party. This idea is important in higher education where student involvement plays a key role in educational quality (Tóth & Surman, 2019). For process design, this means processes should be efficient (Jeston, 2014), encourage student participation, include feedback, and allow for flexible service delivery (flexible learning pathways).

Given this approach, higher education processes can be grouped into three connected layers. The first is core educational processes, which focus directly on teaching and learning. The second is support processes, such as resource management and technical services, which support the main educational work (i.e. IT, facility management). The third is governance processes, which monitor, assess, and guide the institution to ensure it stays on track, maintains quality, and remains accountable. This three-part structure is supported by process classification research (Rosemann & vom Brocke, 2010) and aligns with how value chain analysis distinguishes main and supporting activities (Porter, 1985). Similar structures have been suggested for higher education institutions (Mendonça et al., 2023; Šliž et al., 2022), but not with the specific focus on BPM, ISO 9001, and ESG that this paper offers.

Figure 2 — Core Educational Processes in Higher Education Institutions: A Literature-based Classification



Source: Authors' synthesis based on ENQA (2015), Tóth & Surman (2019), Syed et al. (2018), Santana et al. (2011), and Martin (2016).

The main educational processes in the model are:

- curriculum design and delivery,
- assessment and feedback,
- student support services,
- international and external program management,
- quality assurance and academic governance,
- and community and alums engagement.

The curriculum design and delivery process provides the basis for the model, where results are translated into assessment and feedback, which then helps improve the curriculum. Student support services work with curriculum delivery and assessment to support learning. Managing external and international programs is more complex and requires collaboration between curriculum, support, and governance teams, ensuring stakeholder involvement. Quality assurance and academic governance use the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle to review and improve all processes regularly. By combining these six processes, a connected ESG Part 1 system is noted. Community and alumni engagement may seem less central, but it helps keep the curriculum relevant and valuable for all stakeholders.

ESG Standard 1.2 (Appendix 1) guides curriculum design and delivery, requiring stakeholder involvement and regular reviews (ENQA, 2015). ESG Standards 1.3 and 1.9 guide assessment and feedback. Martin (2016) suggests these are necessary to achieve learning outcomes. Student support services relate to ESG Standard 1.6. Syed et al. (2018) emphasize their role in retention and equity. International program management as a complex process involves many actors and fits BPM analysis, as noted by Santana et al. (2011) and Valença et al. (2013). Quality assurance and academic governance use the PDCA cycle (Deming, 1986; Harmon, 2005) to cover ESG Part 1. Community and alums engagement is not always seen as central, but Surman and Tóth (2019) note its impact on reputation and value.

A Process-Oriented Model for Educational Service Delivery.

From Theory to Model

The conceptual model in this section builds on four main ideas. First, BPM shows that service value comes not just from separate functions but from connected processes, and that effective management requires clear inputs, outputs, indicators, process owners, and improvement steps at each level

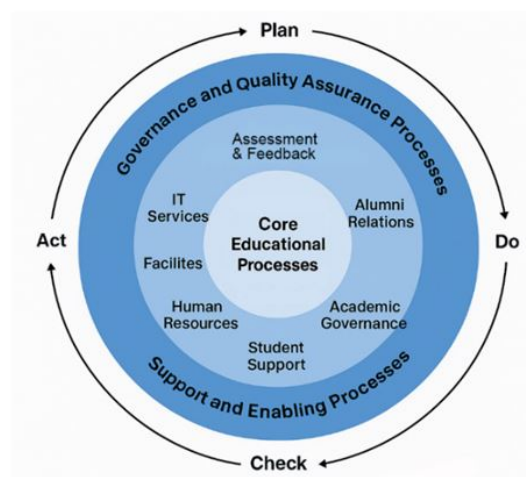
(Rosemann & vom Brocke, 2010; Trkman, 2010). Second, ISO 9001:2015 and ESG work well together as design principles for institutional process architecture because both use a PDCA-based approach for continuous improvement. Third, educational services emerged as a system of processes (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Jeston, 2014), suggesting that educational value is created together and that processes should support student participation, flexibility, and feedback (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Tóth & Surman, 2019). Fourth, research on process maturity indicates that a lack of measurement, documentation, and ownership is a key barrier to quality improvement in HEIs (Antunes & Pinho, 2020; Šliž et al., 2022).

Our conceptual model groups institutional activities into three connected layers: core educational processes, support and enabling processes, and governance and quality assurance processes. Each layer follows an input-process-output-stakeholder approach, and all layers use the PDCA cycle to drive continuous improvement.

The proposed model

In the visual presentation of Figure 3, the educational processes are at the core and feed into the main value-creating activities in any higher education institution (detailed in Figure 2). Enabling processes support these by providing the necessary institutional infrastructure. The outermost layer includes governance and quality assurance processes that help keep the institution accountable and aligned with its strategy. The PDCA cycle surrounds all three layers, showing that quality improvement is a responsibility shared across the whole institution and across operations (ENQA, 2015; Deming, 1986).

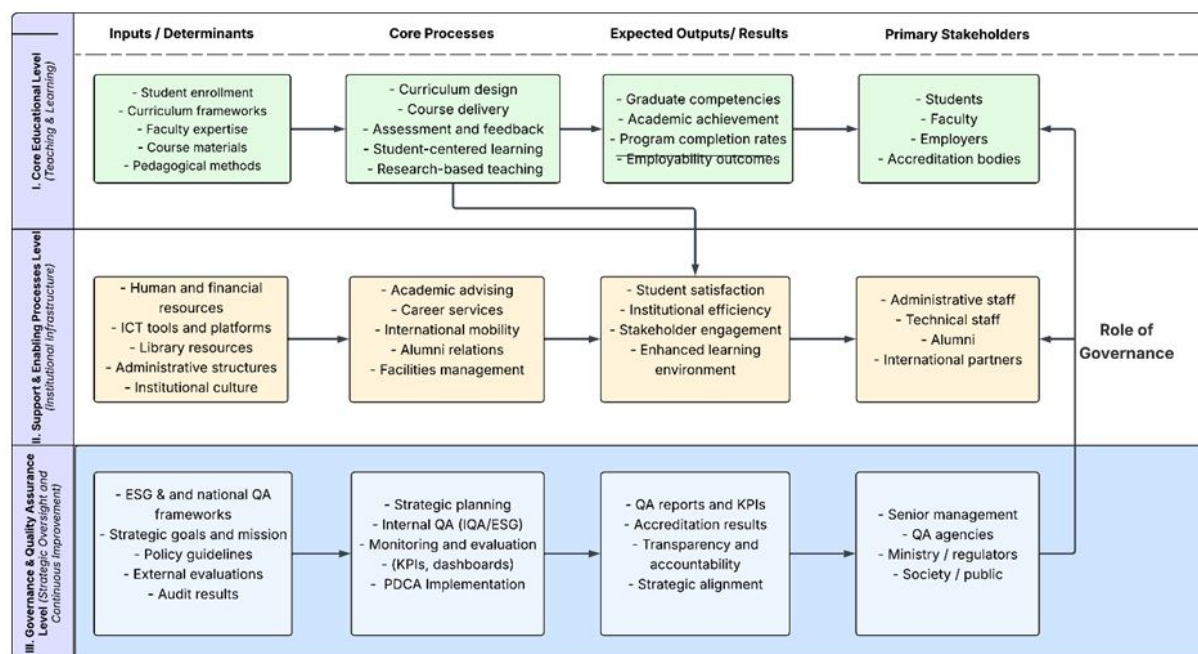
Figure 3 — The Process-Oriented Model of Educational Service Delivery – Concentric Process Architecture of the Model



Source: Own adaptation based on the PDCA cycle (Deming, 1986) and the European Standards and Guidelines (ENQA, 2015)

Figure 4. shows each layer, the inputs and determinants, the main processes, the expected outputs, and the key stakeholders. The figure presents a horizontal progression to clarify each layer's logic and a vertical dimension to demonstrate dependencies among the layers.

Figure 4 — The Process-Oriented Model for Educational Service Delivery in Higher Education Institutions



Source: Authors' original model, derived from Rosemann & vom Brocke (2010), ENQA (2015), Deming (1986), Šliž et al. (2022), and Mendonça et al. (2023).

Interpretation of the model

Layer I: Core Educational Processes

The first layer (see Figure 4) focuses on processes that are directly tied to teaching, learning, and student experiences. As described in Section 2.3, these processes are well established in ESG and higher education management literature. They include curriculum design and approval (ESG 1.2; Tóth & Surman, 2019), delivering courses in different formats (ESG 1.3), assessment and feedback (ESG 1.3, 1.9; Martin, 2016), student-centered learning (ESG 1.3; Syed et al., 2018), and research-based teaching, which is a key part of university education.

Inputs for this layer include student enrollment and background information, curriculum frameworks and learning outcomes, faculty expertise and teaching methods, and course materials and delivery tools. Layer I inputs shape the rest of the processes and affect the model's results. Examining the expected outputs, such as academic achievement, graduate competencies, program completion rates, career outcomes, and graduate employability, we observe that they are closely connected to Layer I inputs. Their alignment is measurable using the ISO 9001:2015 performance indicators and ESG Standards 1.7 and 1.9 (ENQA, 2015; ISO, 2015).

This layer does not operate independently; failures at the core, such as deficiencies in curriculum design, increase the workload for the support layer, including academic advising and remedial support. This demonstrates a cross-layer dependency, which Trkman (2010) identifies as central to the argument for integrated rather than siloed process management in service organizations. When these layers function separately, shortfalls arise because institutions are less able to anticipate and address cross-layer impacts.

Layer II: Support and Enabling Processes

The second layer (Figure 4) includes infrastructure and services that support core educational activities, which include mentoring, academic advising, mobility programs, career support, alumni networks, and facilities management. Inputs for this layer are human and financial resources, ICT tools, library and

learning resources, institutional culture and administrative structures, which, in BPM, contribute to process capability (Bandara et al., 2007; Rosemann & vom Brocke, 2010).

The outcomes of Layer II can lead to improved institutional efficiency and service quality, higher student satisfaction and retention, a better learning environment, and greater stakeholder engagement, with a significant impact on the main educational outcomes. The quality and availability of support services are key factors in predicting retention and equity, as shown in ESG Standard 1.6 (Syed et al., 2018). Because they involve many participants, international mobility programs are well-suited for BPM analysis and improvement (Santana et al., 2011; Valena et al., 2013). Alumni engagement is measurable and therefore included because it strongly affects institutional reputation and long-term value; however, it is often poorly managed despite its strategic importance (Surman & T3th, 2019).

Layer III: Governance and Quality Assurance Processes

The third layer emphasizes processes that ensure strategy consistency, regulatory compliance, and support continuous improvement. These include academic governance, strategic planning, audits, and internal quality checks aligned with ESG standards, as well as monitoring progress through KPIs and dashboards. Inputs such as national quality frameworks, ESG standards, policy guidelines, institutional goals, and external evaluation results help shape the rules and strategies for European HEIs.

Results that show mature processes to external stakeholders and strategically include the outputs of the third layer are quality assurance reports, transparency, institutional accreditation, accountability, and alignment of programs and services. The focus here is on meeting ESG Part 1 standards and following ISO 9001:2015 requirements for quality management systems (ENQA, 2015; ISO, 2015).

One main risk at this level is that quality management could become a rigid formality that follows rules rather than improving the organization (Branković et al., 2022; Steed, 2015). This may lead to missed opportunities for real improvement, less learning within the organization, and mistrust from stakeholders. Our model addresses this risk by having feedback loops between governance and the other two layers. This way, quality assurance outcomes are meaningful and actionable rather than merely formal reporting.

Stakeholder Integration Across Layers

The model shows that each process layer serves different but overlapping stakeholder groups. Their interests need to be considered in both process design and performance measurement. Figure 5 provides an overview of the main stakeholder groups, their main interests, and how they shape institutional design.

Figure 5 — Stakeholder Interests and Process-Level Implications

Stakeholder	Primary Interests	Process-Level Implications
Students	Learning quality, support access, employability, sense of belonging	Core and support layer processes designed around learning outcomes and student experience (ESG 1.3, 1.6; Syed et al., 2018)
Faculty	Academic freedom, research support, fair evaluation	Core layer design preserves collegial governance and pedagogical autonomy (Markus & Jacobson, 2010; Steed, 2015)
Employers	Graduate competencies, industry collaboration, internship opportunities	Core layer outputs align with labor market expectations; support layer must facilitate industry partnerships (Branković et al., 2022)
Government and accreditation bodies	Accountability, ESG and national QA compliance, public value	Governance layer produces transparent, auditable quality assurance evidence (ENQA, 2015; ISO, 2015)
Alumni	Continued engagement, institutional reputation, contribution opportunities	Support layer manages alumni relations as a strategic process (Surman & Tóth, 2019)
Society	Societal contribution and impact, equity, knowledge contribution	All three layers demonstrate public value beyond institutional self-interest (Calvo-Mora et al., 2015)

Source: Authors' synthesis based on ENQA (2015), Syed et al. (2018), Branković et al. (2022), Surman & Tóth (2019), Markus & Jacobson (2010), and Calvo-Mora et al. (2015).

Discussion

What the Model Contributes and Why It Matters

This paper explored how to bring together BPM, ISO 9001:2015, and ESG principles. The aim was to develop a clear, process-based model for delivering educational services that fit both the organizational and teaching needs of higher education institutions. The proposed model addresses the research question in several ways.

First, the model offers a clear way to bring the above frameworks together; the results show that ISO 9001:2015 and ESG are structurally compatible, as both use PDCA logic with a focus on continuous improvement. The challenge is that they operate at different levels and serve different audiences. BPM thus serves as the practical link between the various frameworks by requiring clear inputs, outputs, process owners, and performance indicators. This approach makes ESG standards more specific while staying aligned with ISO 9001:2015 requirements. The model's three-layer structure helps institutions implement this harmonization, an objective not fully explored in prior research.

Furthermore, the model tackles the process maturity gap discussed in Section 2.1. It defines inputs, processes, outputs, and stakeholders at each level, creating the documentation framework that Trkman (2010) and Antunes & Pinho (2020) observed as often missing. With this model, institutions can have a clear framework—one that meets the documentation needs of BPM, the process definition rules of ISO 9001:2015, and the transparency standards of ESG Part 1. This is an important step forward, as it addresses the core issue of why compliance alone has not improved process capability.

Our model directly addresses the tension between managerial goals, such as efficiency and accountability, and academic values, such as diversity, autonomy, and shared governance. This challenge is well documented as a key issue in adopting BPM in higher education. The model balances each side by designing processes that meet managerial needs without limiting academic freedom or educational aims. It treats governance and quality assurance as tools for improvement and control and bases the support layer on service-focused logic rather than industrial efficiency. This approach helps keep the creative and developmental nature of education, as Syed et al. (2018) and Markus & Jacobson (2010) advise against simply applying ISO logic to academic settings.

Implications

The model's main practical value is shifting institutional quality assurance from compliance to continuous improvement. Branković et al. (2022) and Steed (2015) note that in European higher education, ESG compliance is often a reporting task rather than a driver of real process change. The model aims to address this by using feedback across layers, connecting governance findings directly to process redesign in both core and support areas.

Another opportunity relates to digital transformation and workflow automation. Jeston & Nelis (2008) point out that having clear process documentation is necessary before automating workflows or expanding digital services. This model provides institutions with a framework to plan and assess digital transformation projects by clearly defining inputs, processes, and outputs at each level. Without this foundation, digital changes in higher education often automate and exacerbate existing problems.

Finally, an underexplored area in research is compliance management in BPM. Benedek (2012) and Benedek and Surman (2024) show that when compliance principles are built into daily operations rather than handled separately, institutions can move from simply following rules to actively managing risks and supporting integrity. The governance layer provides the structure for this, making compliance part of institutional accountability aligned with HEIs' public mission.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to determine how process management, ISO 9001:2015, and ESG principles can be combined into a clear, process-based model for educational service delivery that aligns with how universities operate and teach. The proposed answer is a three-layered process model: core educational processes, support processes, and governance and quality assurance processes. These three parts follow a consistent input-process-output-stakeholder logic embedded in the PDCA cycle as the primary improvement method.

This paper makes three main contributions. First, it compares BPM, ISO 9001:2015, and ESG, showing that they can be integrated not only in theory but also through a framework that fits the unique needs of HEIs. Second, it suggests a process structure for higher education institutions grounded in the literature at each design stage to address concerns that BPM lacks grounding or detail in academic settings. Third, it identifies the key success factors and barriers to the process approach in academia, proposing a solid starting point for future research.

The paper also has clear limitations. This model is conceptual and has not been tested in practice. It brings together established frameworks and existing research into a single structure. Its assumptions still need empirical testing. The model assumes that institutions are ready in terms of process documentation, data, and leadership commitment, which many higher education institutions do not have.

Another limitation is finding the right balance between being general and addressing specific institutions. Higher education institutions vary in governance, funding, size, focus, mission, and rules. The three-layer structure may work better for some than for others.

In conclusion, this paper suggests a new way to look at quality processes in higher education. Quality is not just about meeting fixed standards but a dynamic feature of a well-designed system of processes.

Institutions that take this view do not give up values like academic freedom or fairness in evaluations for efficiency. Instead, they use clear processes to help teaching, support, and governance work together effectively and improve over time. Future research could examine how this approach can be implemented in European higher education and what factors contribute to its success.

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Appendix*Table A1. The Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area*

ESG Standard	Description
1.1. Policy for quality assurance	Strategy aligned with institutional goals and stakeholder needs
1.2. Design and approval of programs	Stakeholder involvement, learning outcomes
1.3. Student-centered learning	Active engagement, flexible learning paths
1.4. Student admission and progression	Transparent, fair, and supportive processes
1.5. Teaching staff	Qualified and supported educators
1.6. Learning resources and student support	Accessible, adequate infrastructure and services
1.7. Information management	Evidence-based decision-making
1.8. Public information	Accurate and accessible communication to stakeholders
1.9. Ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes	Continuous improvement of programs
1.10. Cyclical external quality assurance	Participation in regular evaluations

Source. ENQA. (2015) https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf

Tamás KOVÁCS

From Compliance to Capability: The Formalization – Professionalization Gap in Hungarian Adult Education

Introduction and Statement of the Problem

The conceptual duality of adult education and training in Hungary reflects the ongoing professional debate concerning the social purpose of the field. The broader andragogical interpretation situates adult learning within an interconnected system of education, teaching, training, cultural development, and self-development, whereas the narrower regulatory and employment-policy approach focuses primarily on programs leading to measurable competencies, formal qualifications, or direct labor-market outcomes (Benedek, 2012; Durkó, 1999; Györgyi et al., 2004). These two approaches are not mutually exclusive; however, their relative emphasis determines whether adult education and training is centered on the formal completion of a program or on the development of participants' autonomy, agency, and social participation (Juhász, 2016; Maróti, 2015). Accordingly, the Hungarian andragogical tradition has regarded the remediation of educational deficits, self-directed cultural development, and the promotion of social integration as fundamental functions of adult learning alongside vocational preparation (Durkó, 1999; Farkas, 2013). It follows that the effectiveness of adult education and training cannot be assessed solely on the basis of the number of completed instructional hours, successful examinations, or certificates issued. A formal credential confirms that specified requirements have been met, but it does not demonstrate whether participants are able to apply the knowledge acquired within their own living and working conditions, further develop it, or transfer it to new contexts (Bajusz, 2006; Benedek, 2009; Csoma, 2009). The utilization of knowledge is jointly shaped by prior learning experiences, life circumstances, family and employment-related responsibilities, the time and resources available, local services, and actual labor-market opportunities (Fehérvári, 2020; Maróti, 2015; Scandurra et al., 2024). Employability therefore cannot be reduced to the possession of a qualification; it also encompasses the genuine capacity to mobilize knowledge, pursue further learning, and act effectively within the labor market (Farkas, 2017; Scandurra et al., 2024).

Similarly, the quality of training cannot be equated solely with lawful operation, program authorization, complete documentation, or procedural compliance in examinations. These elements are indispensable for protecting participants and ensuring transparency, but they provide no direct information as to whether training builds on prior knowledge, adapts to the diverse life circumstances of adult learners, provides formative feedback, or supports the application of acquired competencies (Farkas & Henczi, 2014; Mufic & Fejes, 2022). Regulatory compliance and andragogical quality are therefore interrelated but not interchangeable categories. The problem arises when verifiable organizational compliance becomes a substitute for the quality of teaching and learning, while the conditions required for differentiated learning organisation, mentoring, and knowledge transfer remain contingent.

The international literature directly associates the quality of adult education and training with the professionalization of adult educators. Although European policy documents recognize adult educators as key determinants of quality, their initial preparation and continuing professional development remain fragmented, unevenly accessible, and only partially institutionalized in many countries (Ioannou, 2023). Professionalization therefore cannot be reduced to occasional professional development undertaken by individual educators. What is required is a system in which policy expectations, the operation of training organizations, the definition of professional roles, mentoring, and workplace learning mutually reinforce one another (Chen et al., 2021). Beyond subject-specific knowledge, the necessary competencies include the identification of learning needs, the management of heterogeneous groups, differentiation, supportive communication, formative assessment, self-reflection, and the facilitation of transfer (Benedek, 2007; Csoma, 2009; Dobos, 2009). Recent empirical findings suggest that educators'

self-efficacy, professional enthusiasm, constructivist beliefs, and self-reflection are associated with particular dimensions of learner support and instructional quality (Fischer et al., 2026).

Professional support is particularly important for adults with low levels of educational attainment, unemployed adults, those with previous experiences of educational failure, and those affected by territorial disadvantage. Their participation is influenced not only by the formal availability of training but also by a lack of trust, family responsibilities, health conditions, transport constraints, and the local service environment (Fehérvári, 2020; Fejes, 2012). An emphasis on individual motivation must therefore not lead to the psychologization of structural disadvantage. Personalized support should be complemented by accessible services, career guidance, local partnerships, and opportunities for progression (Broek et al., 2024; Fehérvári & Györgyi, 2006). The role of the adult educator is not to address every social or employment-related problem independently, but to recognize barriers to learning and the limits of their own professional competence, and, where necessary, to involve other professionals and services.

Following the turn of the millennium, the formal frameworks governing institutional operation, program development, registration, evaluation, and monitoring were substantially strengthened within Hungarian adult education and training (Farkas, 2006; Farkas & Henczi, 2014; Györgyi et al., 2004; Kovács, 2026). At the same time, however, no comprehensive system of requirements emerged that would uniformly define the frameworks for the initial preparation, continuing professional development, mentoring, and professional support of adult educators. This is why Farkas (2013a) described the field as an “invisible profession”: qualification pathways, professional identities, and opportunities for further development remained heterogeneous. Methodological knowledge was nevertheless available. Learning arrangements building on prior experience, facilitation, differentiation, and interactive methods were also present in Hungarian professional discourse (Bajusz, 2006; Csoma, 2009; Feketéné Szakos, 2003, 2014). Their institutional transmission, however, remained uneven, with the result that training quality depended to a considerable extent on educators’ individual experience and the professional culture of the training organisation (Farkas, 2013a; Kovács, 2026). Developments over the past quarter-century have mobilized substantial resources for the training of disadvantaged groups, the development of key competencies, the establishment of mentoring networks, and the creation of local employment partnerships. Centralized programs enabled broad outreach and capacity building, while third-sector initiatives frequently combined personal recruitment, individual development plans, mentoring, psychosocial support, and employer engagement (Arapovics, 2007; Fehérvári & Györgyi, 2006; Györgyi, 2006; Juhász, 2009). At the same time, projects financed through the Structural Funds also generated administrative, financial, and sustainability-related dependencies (Arató et al., 2008a, 2008b). The author’s previous research also identified developments that were discontinued after the mandatory sustainability period, with the result that the methodological and organizational knowledge accumulated within them was not durably embedded in institutional practice (Kovács, 2026). The central contradiction, therefore, lies not in the absence of innovation, but in the failure of project-based solutions to develop into an accessible and sustainable infrastructure for professionalization.

This study conceptualizes the problem as a compliance–professionalization asymmetry: the regulation of training organizations, programs, administrative processes, and documented outcomes became more strongly institutionalized than the definition, development, and workplace support of the competencies of the professionals responsible for implementing the learning process. The central research question is therefore how, and through which institutional mechanisms, the regulatory formalization of Hungarian adult education and training became decoupled from the professionalization of adult educators after the turn of the millennium. Drawing on international literature, expert interviews conducted as part of the author’s previous research, and a comparison of centralized and third-sector programs, the study examines the relationship between educator competencies, the organizational conditions of program delivery, and the institutional transmission of professional knowledge. Its starting

proposition is that learner-centered approaches based on mentoring and local partnerships did emerge, but were not consistently incorporated into a system capable of ensuring educators' initial preparation, continuing professional development, and the institutional preservation of accumulated knowledge.

Methodology and Research Framework

Research Design

The study employs a qualitative, multi-source comparative research design. Its aim is to explore how the conditions supporting the professionalization of adult educators and the learning of adults in vulnerable situations are represented in the international literature, Hungarian expert interpretations, and domestic program practice. The research does not seek to establish causal evidence of program effects, construct a ranking of effectiveness, or undertake a cost-effectiveness comparison. Instead, it examines the professional mechanisms and conditions of institutionalization identifiable across different sources (Cserné Adermann, 2018; Falus, 2014; Sántha, 2009, 2015).

The methodological approach consists of a qualitative synthesis supported by source and perspective triangulation. International research provides a comparative framework; expert interviews contribute interpretations of the development and operational contradictions of the Hungarian system; and program documents make the practical components of implementation amenable to analysis. The comparison identifies convergences, partial overlaps, divergences, and evidence gaps across the sources. At the macro level, the study examines the regulatory and funding environment; at the meso level, the operation of training and partner organizations; and at the micro level, educator-, mentor-, and participant-support processes. The units of analysis are not the programs or interviewees in themselves, but the professional mechanisms that influence the quality of learning and the application of knowledge.

Source Corpus

The international component consists of a purposive, concept-driven review of the literature. The search focused on the professionalization of adult educators, educator competencies, professional development, training quality, learning transfer, support for low-qualified adults, and employability. Priority was given to peer-reviewed reviews, systematic and scoping reviews, and empirical studies conducted in adult education, training, and continuing education settings. The source corpus places particular emphasis on findings published after 2020, while also drawing on earlier foundational works to support the historical and theoretical interpretation of the problem under investigation (Chen et al., 2021; Ioannou, 2023; Scandurra et al., 2024; Fischer et al., 2026). The review does not constitute a comprehensive systematic literature review: it did not employ a registered protocol, exhaustive database coverage, or meta-analysis. Its function is to establish the comparative framework required for interpreting the Hungarian empirical material. International findings are therefore used not as directly transferable normative standards, but as points of reference. Particular attention is paid to the process-oriented nature of professional preparation, organizational support, opportunities for practical application, feedback, and follow-up (Ioannou, 2023; Nímanté et al., 2025).

The second group of sources consists of a purposive secondary analysis of semi-structured expert interviews conducted as part of the author's previous research (Kovács, 2026). The interviews addressed the institutional development of Hungarian adult education and training, the relationship between policy objectives and implementation, discrepancies between regulation and practice, the preparedness of adult educators, and the sustainability of professional innovations. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. The study did not aim to identify a representative distribution of opinions, but rather to elicit information-rich interpretations originating from different positions within the system.

Four of the original five interviews were included in the analytical corpus of the present study; one interview was excluded in its entirety because permission for publication had not been granted. The sample comprises András Benedek, Éva Farkas, Tibor Bors Borbély-Pecze, and József Palotás. András Benedek represents the perspective of institutional development, national-level governance, and the

continuity of professional knowledge. Éva Farkas emphasizes the relationships among regulation, training quality, learning outcomes, and the professionalization of adult educators. Tibor Bors Borbély-Pecze addresses the relationship between career guidance, employment services, and transitions from learning to work. József Palotás contributes perspectives on the regional training system, institutional governance, the implementation of legislation, and responsiveness to labor-market needs. The interviews do not represent the views of the profession as a whole; rather, they provide expert perspectives that assist in interpreting the processes reflected in documentary and program sources.

The third source group consists of documents relating to centrally coordinated developments and civil-society and nonprofit programs. Programs were included if they addressed the learning and labor-market integration of vulnerable or low-qualified adults, if educator, mentor, or other support roles could be identified, and if sufficient documentation was available to reconstruct the program's professional design. The corpus of centralized initiatives includes national competence-development, employment, and mentoring programs, including the "Actively for Knowledge" program. The third sector is represented by the cases of EU-Háló, ZSUTI, NOSZA, and LIFT. These programs combine network development, community embeddedness, individual development, psychosocial support, mentoring, and work experience in different ways (Arapovics, 2007; Györgyi, 2006; Farkas & Kovács, 2014; Kovács, 2026).

The target groups, duration, funding arrangements, indicator systems, and follow-up procedures of the programs differ considerably; consequently, their effectiveness indicators cannot be compared directly. Quantitative data are included in the analysis only when the original source, the number of participants, the meaning of the indicator, and the timing of follow-up can be identified. The analytical value of the programs therefore lies primarily in their documented professional mechanisms rather than in outcome figures that are not comparable across cases.

Analytical Framework

The three source groups are compared along eight dimensions:

- the assessment of participants' needs and competencies;
- consideration of prior knowledge and experience;
- learner-centered differentiation;
- educator and mentor competencies and their development;
- psychosocial and practical support;
- work experience and learning transfer;
- local, institutional, and employer partnerships; and
- evaluation, follow-up, sustainability, and institutionalization (Ioannou, 2023; Nĩmante et al., 2025).

The coding procedure combines deductive and inductive approaches. In the deductive phase, relevant findings from the literature, interview excerpts, and program documents were identified on the basis of the eight predefined dimensions. The inductive phase incorporated themes emerging from the Hungarian material, including the loss of professional knowledge during institutional restructuring, the insecure status of project staff, the lack of coordination between programs, and tensions between administrative and professional responsibilities. The source groups were first analyzed separately and subsequently integrated into a shared comparative matrix. Convergence is considered to occur when a professional mechanism is identified as relevant in international research, also appears in the expert interviews, and can be documented in at least one Hungarian program. Partial convergence refers to cases in which an element is identifiable in several source groups, but its meaning or institutional level differs. Divergence occurs when the sources interpret the same phenomenon differently. An evidence

gap is identified where the available documentation or follow-up does not permit verification of a claim. Convergence indicates professional relevance, but does not in itself demonstrate a causal effect.

Source Criticism, Ethics, and Limitations

The evidentiary strength of the sources used in the study varies. Peer-reviewed research and independent evaluations provide stronger evidence than official program documents or reports produced by implementing organizations. The latter are primarily suitable for reconstructing program design. Information derived from the author's previous research and practical experience provides contextual insight, but cannot be treated as independent evidence of program effects. Accordingly, the formulation of claims distinguishes among research findings, data reported by programs, and reconstructed program experience.

Researcher positionality is relevant because the author has participated in the design and implementation of civil-society, adult education, community development, and employment programs. This experience supports the interpretation of operational relationships, but also entails a risk of bias. To mitigate this risk, the analysis distinguishes documented facts, expert statements, international findings, and the author's own conclusions. Personal involvement is not used as evidence of effectiveness.

The interviews are used exclusively with permission for publication. Direct quotations must be verified against the original transcripts, while no quotation, individual statement, or aggregated conclusion from the interview lacking permission may be included.

The study is limited by the purposive and non-systematic nature of the international literature review, the small and non-representative sample of four experts, and the heterogeneity of the program corpus. It therefore makes no claims regarding frequency, does not conduct a meta-analysis, and does not directly compare program effects or cost-effectiveness. Its conclusions concern recurring professional mechanisms and the conditions under which they become institutionalized. The analysis focuses on developments during the two decades following the turn of the millennium and therefore does not provide a comprehensive assessment of the most recent regulatory changes.

Results and Interpretation

System-Level Conditions for the Professionalization of Adult Educators

The strongest point of convergence across the three source groups is that the quality of adult education and training cannot be separated from the preparedness of the professionals who implement the learning process. Professionalization, however, does not imply that all educator, mentor, counsellor, and program-organizer roles should be subject to a single uniform qualification requirement. Rather, it presupposes a shared core of andragogical competencies supplemented by preparation tailored to different roles and target groups. This common competence base includes the assessment of learning needs and prior knowledge, differentiated learning arrangements that build on adults' experience, formative assessment, supportive communication, and the facilitation of the application of acquired knowledge. In the case of participants in vulnerable situations, these competencies are complemented by the recognition of barriers to learning, support for motivation, cooperation across services, and the management of professional boundaries (Csoma, 2009; Dobos, 2009; Benedek, 2012; Ioannou, 2023). International findings indicate that the policy-level recognition of adult educators as key determinants of quality has not everywhere been accompanied by a comparable degree of institutionalization of their preparation and continuing professional development. Professional development opportunities are often fragmented, unevenly accessible, and dependent on individual initiative or the resources of the employing organisation. Competence frameworks are therefore of limited effectiveness unless they are accompanied by supported practice, workplace feedback, collegial learning, and opportunities for professional progression. In this sense, professionalization entails the alignment of policy expectations, organizational operation, and individual professional development (Chen et al., 2021; Ioannou, 2023).

The expert interviews identified the same deficit within the Hungarian system from different perspectives. In Éva Farkas's interpretation, the development of legislative and accreditation frameworks strengthened the auditability of operations but did not establish a unified system for the continuing professional preparation of training providers, educators, organizers, and assessors. The decline of university-level andragogy programs simultaneously reduced the opportunities for the institutional transmission of knowledge concerning the distinctive characteristics of adult learning. This is consistent with the description of adult education and training as an "invisible profession": the social significance of the field was not accompanied by a unified professional status or a predictable professional development pathway (Farkas, 2013; Kovács, 2026). András Benedek highlighted the tension between the accumulated body of andragogical and vocational pedagogical knowledge and its practical application. In his interpretation, methodological knowledge was available, yet the organizational and instructional logic of school-based education for children continued to prevail in several training environments. Consequently, consideration of adults' prior experience, autonomy, and life-situation constraints did not become a universally accepted professional norm. From this perspective, the problem is not simply a lack of knowledge, but the weakness of the institutional transmission and consistent application of existing knowledge (Benedek, 2007, 2012; Kovács, 2026). Tibor Bors Borbély-Pecze interpreted training as part of life-course development and the support of labor-market transitions. From this perspective, training effectiveness may also require career guidance, information provision, competence assessment, and support for further progression. The role of the adult educator is not to assume responsibility for these services, but to recognize barriers extending beyond the learning process and to cooperate with the appropriate professionals. At the same time, the interview indicated that the preparation and professional qualification of training personnel did not become a consistent component of employment and social-inclusion programs either (Borbély-Pecze, 2010; Kovács, 2026). Drawing on the experience of the regional training centers, József Palotás directed attention to the organizational conditions of professionalization. These centers developed capacities for analyzing labor-market needs, designing programs, and facilitating inter-institutional cooperation; repeated reorganizations, however, disrupted several channels through which this knowledge had been transmitted. The preparation of professionals therefore became increasingly tied to temporary projects. This demonstrates that the presence of competent professionals does not in itself ensure lasting quality if the institutions and professional communities that carry and transmit knowledge are not sustained (Kovács, 2026).

The common finding emerging from the interviews is therefore not the complete absence of andragogical knowledge or innovation. Considerable professional knowledge accumulated within the Hungarian system at universities, research institutes, regional training centers, civil-society organizations, and development projects. Its institutional carriers and channels of transmission, however, were repeatedly disrupted, while educator competencies were not consistently connected to initial preparation, supported practice, continuing professional development, and professional progression. On the basis of the sources, four fundamental conditions can be identified: a shared core of andragogical competencies; role-specific preparation; an organizational environment supporting practical application; and the documentation and transmission of institutional knowledge. The lack of professionalization should therefore be interpreted not as the personal inadequacy of individual educators, but as the insufficient coordination of these conditions (Chen et al., 2021; Ioannou, 2023; Nĩmante et al., 2025).

Elements of Professionalization in Hungarian Program Practice

The analysis of the program corpus demonstrates that professional components associated with the professionalization of adult educators—including needs assessment, mentoring, individual development plans, psychosocial support, work experience, and local partnerships—appeared in several Hungarian development initiatives. However, these elements did not function as components of a unified system of educator requirements, but as intervention components adapted to the objectives, target groups, and funding periods of the respective programs. Program documents are therefore primarily suitable for examining the professional functions assigned to educators, mentors, and other

support professionals; because of their differing indicators and follow-up periods, they cannot be used for direct comparisons of effectiveness.

Among the centralized initiatives, the “Actively for Knowledge”¹ program sought to integrate training, basic competence development, the completion of missing educational qualifications, and the acquisition of work experience within a single intervention process. According to the available program data, 19,434 participants had been enrolled by March 2020, of whom 8,997 entered training, 7,456 completed it, and 1,108 gained access to a work-experience opportunity (Prime Minister’s Office, 2023; Kovács, 2026). These data do not permit the establishment of the program’s causal effects, but they clearly illustrate the unequal accessibility of participation in training, training completion, and the practical component enabling the workplace application of knowledge. Work experience reached only a proportion of those participating in training; consequently, the program provided broader coverage in documenting learning outcomes than in directly supporting transfer. From the perspective of adult-educator professionalization, the lesson of the program is that educators’ work cannot end with the delivery of curriculum content and the formal completion of training. Participants may require further support to test the competencies they have acquired, practice the role of an employee, and address problems arising in new situations. This is consistent with international research on professional development and learning transfer, which emphasizes the combined presence of opportunities for application, feedback, workplace support, and follow-up (Nimante et al., 2025). The documentation does not, however, make it possible to determine whether the educators and mentors working in the program received preparation within a unified system designed to remain in place over the longer term.

Among the third-sector cases, EU-Háló² may be understood primarily not as a program providing direct training to participants, but as a national and regional capacity-building initiative for civil-society employment organizations. Implemented between 2001 and 2003, the program involved more than one hundred organizations and combined organizational audits, methodological development, training, exchanges of experience, and the establishment of regional human-service networks. Documented outcomes included improvements in project-management capacity, partnership activity, documentation, and administrative operation. The program thus represented the organizational dimension of professionalization: it developed not only the knowledge of individual staff members, but also the functioning and collaborative capacity of organizations. A limitation of EU-Háló, however, was that the network and methodological functions it created operated within a project framework. The sources do not provide evidence that organizational auditing, regular professional support, and network-based knowledge sharing were transformed into permanently available nationwide services after the project ended. The initiative may therefore be assessed not simply as a “good practice”, but as a professionalization mechanism that was established but did not develop into a lasting infrastructure. This is directly related to the findings of Ioannou (2023) and Chen et al. (2021): professionalization is not equivalent to the provision of occasional training but requires the durable interconnection of policy, organizational, and individual-development levels.

The ZSUTI³ employment program applied a training and employment approach within Roma communities in Békés County. The program combined local outreach, the establishment of trust through community relationships, preparatory activities, mentoring, and supported employment (Farkas & Kovács, 2014; Kovács, 2026). Its analytical significance does not lie in an independently verified

¹Actively for Knowledge: a nationwide social inclusion program that combined basic competence development, the attainment of formal educational qualifications, foundational vocational preparation, and, to a limited extent, work experience for low-qualified and disadvantaged participants.

²EU-Háló: a nationwide network- and organisational-development program coordinated between 2001 and 2003 by the Hungarian Federation of Public-Benefit Organisations Supporting Unemployed People. It supported the auditing, training, methodological development, and cooperation of regional civil-society employment organisations.

³ZSUTI: an employment program targeting Roma communities in Békés County that combined community outreach, preparatory support, mentoring, and supported employment.

employment effect, but in the fact that it situated participation in training within a cultural and community context. Outreach and retention required professionals who, in addition to delivering curriculum content, understood the target group's local network of relationships, recognized barriers to participation, and were able to cooperate with community and employment stakeholders. The program thus brings cultural sensitivity, the development of trust-based relationships, and the management of local partnerships into the competence profile of adult educators. On the basis of the available program documentation, however, it cannot be claimed that these competencies were supported by nationally standardized preparation.

The labor-market reintegration project implemented by the NOSZA Foundation within the framework of HEFOP 2.3.1⁴ aimed to train and support the employment reintegration of 36 unemployed people disadvantaged in the labor market, including Roma participants. The program combined competence development and vocational training, individual progression pathways, structured mentoring, psychosocial support, and cooperation among social workers, psychologists, and trained support professionals. The project was implemented with funding of HUF 112 million. The source material reports an employment rate of 65 per cent, but this figure must be treated as program-reported data rather than as the result of an independent impact evaluation. The professional significance of the NOSZA project lies in its organisation of training not as a self-contained event, but as part of a process leading towards entry into employment. Individual assessment and development planning were followed by training, mentoring, psychosocial assistance, and so-called "first steps into employment". Participants were able to test their acquired knowledge partly in more protected and partly in open labor-market environments, while mentoring support continued. This arrangement made visible the organizational conditions of learning transfer: participants received not only training, but also opportunities for application, feedback, and support in addressing problems. Within the model, the roles of the educator, mentor, psychologist, and social professional were not merged, but were connected through a coordinated service process. The sources do not, however, demonstrate that the competence profiles and preparation systems associated with these roles became institutionalized beyond the project.

The LIFT program⁵ – whose full Hungarian name translates as Opportunity–Integration–Employment–Learning – was implemented in 2006 in Szekszárd and its surrounding area under the coordination of the Blue Bird Foundation. Its target group consisted of people experiencing long-term unemployment, individuals without marketable vocational qualifications, and persons with disabilities. The program's transitional-employment model combined vocational training, mentoring, social support, and direct work experience. A training kitchen and family-friendly restaurant were established at the Bartina Street site, functioning as both training and protected-employment settings; the program also covered participants' commuting costs. In the LIFT program, the management of practical barriers to participation was not treated as an additional social component, but as a condition of the training and employment process. The coverage of transport costs, mentoring support, and supported employment demonstrates that dropout and labor-market transfer cannot be interpreted solely in terms of participants' motivation or vocational preparedness. The continued operation of the training kitchen established within the program indicates the preservation of local capacity, but does not demonstrate the nationwide institutionalization of the full transitional-employment model or of the preparation of the professionals working within it. The continuation of a service and the system-level transfer of a methodological model must therefore be distinguished from one another.

⁴NOSZA Labour-Market Reintegration Project: a comprehensive program implemented by the Foundation for the Non-Profit Sector under HEFOP 2.3.1, designed to support the training, mentoring, psychosocial assistance, and entry into employment of 36 disadvantaged unemployed participants.

⁵LIFT: Opportunity–Integration–Employment–Learning; a transitional employment program implemented by the Blue Bird Foundation in Szekszárd in 2006, combining vocational training, mentoring, social support, and supported work experience.

The comparison of the programs reveals five professional mechanisms documented across multiple cases: the assessment of individual needs; personalized, trust-based outreach; continuous mentoring; work experience enabling the practical application of acquired knowledge; and cooperation among local service providers and employers. In the NOSZA and LIFT cases, these were complemented by psychosocial support and the management of practical barriers to participation. EU-Háló emphasized organizational auditing and network-based knowledge sharing, while ZSUTI placed particular emphasis on community embeddedness and cultural sensitivity.

In substantive terms, these mechanisms correspond to the conditions for professionalization and transfer identified in the international literature. Nímante et al. (2025) emphasize the significance of practical application, feedback, collegial cooperation, and organizational support; Ioannou (2023) highlights the institutional fragmentation of continuing professional development; and Chen et al. (2021) stress the need to align policy expectations, organizational operation, and educators' professional learning. These conditions appeared in several forms within Hungarian programs, but they did not become a generally accessible, funded, and durable professional infrastructure. The distinction between centralized and civil-society programs therefore cannot be described simply as an opposition between standardization and personalized operation. Centralized programs provided broader coverage, more uniform administration, and greater potential for nationwide expansion; some civil-society programs, by contrast, implemented more intensive individual support, stronger local embeddedness, and closer coordination among multiple services. The limitations of centralized programs lay in the unevenness of differentiation and follow-up, while those of civil-society programs included limited coverage, dependence on project funding, and reliance on key individuals. The finding emerging from the program corpus is therefore not the superiority of either organizational form, but the absence of an effective connection among national capacity, local adaptation, and sustained professional support.

Project-Based Innovation and the Institutionalization Gap

A central finding of the comparison across the three source groups is that the enduring problem within Hungarian adult education and training was not primarily a lack of innovation, but the limited institutionalization of innovation. Following the turn of the millennium, several programs applied individual needs assessment, mentoring, competence development, work experience, and local partnerships. These solutions, however, were typically tied to a particular funding cycle, implementing organisation, or professional community. Once the project ended, the financial, organizational, and knowledge-sharing infrastructure capable of sustaining their application often ceased to exist (Kovács, 2026). Institutionalization is not equivalent to the temporary continuation of a program or a service created within it. A professional solution may become a durable component of the system only if its content is documented, the competencies required for its application are defined, its financing is predictable, its outcomes are evaluated, and it can be adapted by other organizations. Formal sustainability requirements ensure only some of these conditions. A tool, service, or workplace may continue to exist without the methodological knowledge developed within the program becoming accessible more broadly.

Project dependence also affected the position of educators and mentors. Development initiatives often provided internal preparation, methodological guidance, or professional support, but these were generally aligned with the tasks and duration of the project. When funding ended, employment relationships, professional communities, supervision, and opportunities for knowledge sharing could also disappear. Professional knowledge consequently became partly dependent on individuals: the departure of experienced educators, mentors, or project managers could also result in the loss of the practices they had applied. Program documentation generally recorded the processes required for administrative compliance in detail but made the professional decisions shaping participant outreach, retention, and support less accessible. Reports usually permit more precise reconstruction of participant numbers and completed outputs than of the competencies, local adaptation, and inter-institutional cooperation

required by a program. Monitoring therefore strengthened accountability but contributed only to a limited extent to the transfer of methodological knowledge.

The lack of institutionalization was further intensified by weak coordination among programs. Initiatives supporting similar target groups operated within different funding and governance systems, often in parallel with one another. Because program monitoring was conducted separately, the system-level identification of territorial gaps, duplication, and transferable professional solutions remained limited. One consequence was a cycle of repeated reinvention: new funding periods repeatedly recreated needs-assessment, mentoring, and cooperation procedures that had already appeared in earlier projects but had not been incorporated into a shared methodological knowledge base.

The gap between project-based innovation and institutionalization can be identified at three levels. A professional transfer gap occurs when an effective method does not become a documented and teachable competence. An organizational transfer gap arises when the professional community, partnership, or support structure established within a program does not survive. A policy transfer gap occurs when local experience and evaluation do not lead to funded and accountable system-level solutions. These three levels reinforce one another: without a documented method, organizational transfer is difficult to ensure, while without stable organizational carriers, policy-level scaling is likely to remain formal. Institutionalization, however, must not mean the mechanical nationwide adoption of a single program model. The value of local initiatives often lay precisely in their adaptation to participants' life circumstances, the municipal environment, and the local labor market. A system-level solution therefore requires shared professional minimum standards, clearly defined competencies, predictable funding, methodological support, and consistent evaluation, while leaving room for local adaptation.

The findings suggest that the regulatory formalization of Hungarian adult education and training became decoupled from the professionalization of adult educators because the institutions ensuring the auditability of programs and organizations were developed more durably than the systems supporting educators' preparation, workplace learning, and the transmission of professional knowledge. Regulation was capable of specifying the documents, procedures, and outputs through which completion of training could be demonstrated, but it did not create a similarly coherent infrastructure to ensure how the professionals delivering training should acquire, apply, and further develop the competencies required to support adult learning. This constitutes the empirical basis of the compliance–professionalization asymmetry defined in the introduction.

Recommendations

The findings of the study suggest that the central task in the further development of Hungarian adult education and training is not the launch of additional isolated methodological projects, but the durable institutionalization of the andragogical knowledge already available. Following the turn of the millennium, regulation made the monitoring of training providers, programs, documentation, and outcomes increasingly detailed, but it did not establish a system of comparable weight for the preparation, professional support, and renewal of the knowledge of adult educators. The recommendations therefore aim to reduce the compliance–professionalization asymmetry and address the levels of policy, organizational practice, educator development, program evaluation, and knowledge transfer.

A Shared Core of Andragogical Competencies and Role-Specific Requirements

The development of a national competence framework for adult educators is warranted. Such a framework should not seek to force the distinct roles of educators, trainers, mentors, counsellors, and workplace instructors into a single professional profile, but should define the common minimum standards of professional work with adults. These should include the assessment of learning needs and prior knowledge, the organisation of learning based on adults' experience, differentiated support for heterogeneous groups, formative assessment, inclusive communication, self-reflection, and support for learning transfer. When working with participants in vulnerable situations, additional requirements

should include the recognition of structural barriers to learning, cooperation across services, and adherence to professional competence boundaries.

The competence framework should not consist solely of a declarative list. It should be linked to observable professional activities, assessment criteria, and role-specific requirements. A vocational theory instructor, a workplace-based practical trainer, a mentor, and a career guidance counsellor, for example, require different forms of preparation, while all need an understanding of the distinctive characteristics of adult learners. International research indicates that a unified framework can function effectively only if policy expectations, the human-resource practices of training organizations, and educators' professional development are interconnected (Chen et al., 2021; Ioannou, 2023; Fischer et al., 2026).

Establishing a System of Continuing Professional Development

Professionalization cannot be achieved through a single-pre-entry training program. Adult educators require a progressive professional development pathway that includes initial preparation, supported practical experience, regular continuing education, mentoring, professional feedback, and the recognition of experiential learning. This system should be accessible to professionals working in higher education, vocational education and training, corporate training, civil-society organizations, and project-based training environments.

Participation in continuing education does not in itself demonstrate a change in professional practice. The application of newly acquired knowledge requires time, opportunities for experimentation, collegial cooperation, managerial support, and follow-up. According to the review by Nĩmante et al. (2025), these organizational conditions consistently support the transfer of professional development, while evidence concerning longer-term application remains limited. The financing and evaluation of continuing education should therefore consider not only the number of training sessions and participants, but also the practical application and organizational integration of new methods.

The professional position of mentors requires particular attention. In several of the programs examined, mentoring emerged as a key element of participant outreach, retention in training, and transition into employment, yet mentoring responsibilities were often not clearly distinguished from educational, social, psychological, and employment services. It is therefore necessary to define mentoring roles, competencies, workload limits, referral obligations, and cooperation protocols. A professional mentor is not responsible for resolving every problem experienced by a participant, but accompanies the learning and progression process, recognizes the boundaries of their own competence, and has access to other service providers.

Integrating Professional Minimum Standards into Program Funding

The institutionalization of learner-centered approaches requires more than their inclusion in individual funding schemes as recommendations or optional components. Programs targeting adults in vulnerable situations should include the following as funded professional minimum standards:

- individual assessment of needs and competencies;
- recognition of prior learning;
- an individual learning or development plan;
- mentoring of appropriate intensity;
- career guidance and progression support;
- opportunities for the practical application of learning;
- cooperation with local service providers and employers; and
- follow-up after the completion of training.

Dedicated financial and time allocations should be assigned to these requirements. Otherwise, professional support becomes an expectation that implementing organizations must meet at the expense of direct educational or administrative tasks. The centralized and third-sector programs examined demonstrate that mentoring, psychosocial support, work experience, and local partnerships can be implemented in Hungary, but their accessibility, intensity, and sustainability have varied across projects.

The Actively for Knowledge program, for example, achieved substantial training coverage, while access to work experience was available to far fewer participants than access to training. The NOSZA and LIFT programs provided more intensive support integrating multiple services, but their scale and funding did not permit nationwide expansion. The policy task is therefore to connect the capacity of centralized programs with the integrated professional components of local programs, rather than to rank the two organizational forms. At the same time, local adaptation must be preserved. Institutionalization should not mean the mechanical nationwide replication of a single program model, since participants' life circumstances, transport options, service environments, and local labor markets differ across regions. At the national level, professional functions, competence requirements, principles of evaluation, and funding guarantees should be defined, while the specific mode of implementation should be adapted to territorial needs.

Reforming Program Evaluation

The numbers of participants reached, entering training, completing the program, and obtaining certificates should remain part of the evaluation of training programs. These indicators, however, cannot be used as the sole measures of learning or labor-market effectiveness. Program completion, the application of knowledge, and sustained employment outcomes represent different analytical levels. Favorable participant experiences or measurable skills development should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of longer-term labor-market impact (Scandurra et al., 2024).

The evaluation system should distinguish among:

- implementation indicators, such as participant outreach and program completion;
- learning outcomes and changes in competencies;
- learning transfer, meaning the application of acquired knowledge;
- participation in further learning and the use of services;
- entry into employment and the sustainability of employment; and
- the organizational sustainability of professional solutions.

For employment indicators, the meaning of "placement" should be defined consistently, including whether it refers to supported or open labor-market employment, the required duration of employment, and the timing of follow-up. Aggregating indicators based on different definitions is not methodologically justified. Evaluation of program effects should also consider local labor-market conditions, the composition of the target group, and the intensity of services provided.

Monitoring participant development should not be restricted to employment status. Program outcomes may include entry into further learning, improved capacity for independent administrative action, greater clarity regarding career objectives, increased learning self-efficacy, or the strengthening of competencies required to retain employment. Measuring these outcomes does not replace employment indicators; rather, it enables a more precise interpretation of the changes achieved by a program and of the outcomes that were not attained. Multidimensional evaluation also reduces the risk of interpreting participants' structural barriers as a lack of motivation.

Establishing a National Methodological Knowledge System

A nationally accessible methodological system should be established to preserve and transfer the knowledge accumulated in programs. This system should function not simply as a document repository,

but as a quality-assured knowledge base. It should include information on program target groups, intervention logics, competence requirements, methods applied, outcome indicators, limitations, and conditions of adaptation. The reliability of sources and the evidentiary strength of claims should be clearly indicated, distinguishing among independent evaluations, reports by implementing organizations, and reconstructed program experience.

On the basis of the programs examined, the systematic documentation of mentoring, transitional-employment, local-partnership, and organizational-development models is particularly warranted. EU-Háló, for example, combined organizational auditing, training, and network-based knowledge sharing. NOSZA and LIFT integrated training, personalized support, and work experience into a unified process, while ZSUTI made visible the importance of community embeddedness and trust building. General claims of effectiveness cannot be derived from these models, but their professional components can be documented, taught, and adapted to new environments in ways that permit further evaluation.

The knowledge system should be complemented by professional communities. Educator and mentor learning cannot be supported exclusively through manuals or online learning materials. Regional or thematic workshops, case discussions, mentoring, supervision, and inter-institutional exchanges of experience are also required. These mechanisms could reduce the dependence of professional knowledge on key individuals and temporary projects and help ensure that new development initiatives do not recreate the same procedures from the beginning in every funding cycle.

Clearly Defining Institutional Responsibility

Professionalization cannot be sustained solely on the basis of educators' individual responsibility. It is necessary to determine which institution is responsible for maintaining the competence framework, assuring the quality of continuing education, operating the methodological knowledge base, facilitating knowledge transfer across programs, and regularly evaluating results. These functions may be shared among higher education institutions, national professional organizations, training providers, employer representatives, and third-sector professional workshops, but their coordination cannot remain the responsibility of temporary projects. Higher education has a particularly important role in systematizing professional knowledge, researching competencies, developing preparation programs, and advancing evaluation methods. The weakening of the institutional base of andragogical knowledge cannot be compensated for solely by short-term project-based training. The professionalization of adult educators requires a stable academic and educational foundation that maintains links with practical training settings and is capable of transforming program experience into knowledge that can be researched, taught, and further developed.

Conclusion

The study sought to answer how, and through which institutional mechanisms, the regulatory formalization of Hungarian adult education and training became decoupled from the professionalization of adult educators after the turn of the millennium. On the basis of the comparison of international literature, four expert interviews, and the selected programs, this decoupling was not the consequence of a single legislative decision or institutional restructuring. Rather, it represents a structural asymmetry that developed over an extended period, in which the monitoring of training organizations, programs, administrative processes, and documented outcomes became more durably institutionalized than the definition, development, and workplace support of the competencies of the professionals delivering training.

The study did not demonstrate an absence of andragogical knowledge or professional innovation. Learning arrangements building on prior knowledge, individual needs assessment, mentoring, psychosocial support, work experience, and local partnerships all appeared in Hungarian scholarship, higher education, regional training institutions, centralized development programs, and third-sector initiatives. The central problem was that these elements did not consistently become accessible, funded, and accountable professional minimum standards. They were largely tied to projects, organizations,

and key individuals; consequently, the end of a funding cycle or a transformation of the institutional environment could also result in the loss of knowledge.

The compliance–professionalization asymmetry does not imply that regulation is unnecessary. Legality, transparency, the protection of participants, and the accountability of public expenditure are indispensable conditions of training quality. The problem arises when administrative compliance becomes a substitute for the quality of teaching and learning. A properly documented program does not necessarily build on adults' prior knowledge, adapt to their life circumstances, or ensure the practical application of acquired knowledge. Quality can therefore become systemic only when institutional oversight is accompanied by professional educator preparation, organizational support, methodological knowledge transfer, and valid follow-up.

The limitations of the research do not permit conclusions regarding the extent to which individual professional mechanisms improved program completion or employment outcomes. The four interviews are not representative, the program documentation is heterogeneous, and the international literature review was purposive rather than fully systematic. Convergence across the sources therefore indicates professional relevance, not causal evidence. It can nevertheless be stated with reasonable confidence that needs assessment, differentiated learning arrangements, mentoring, practical application, local partnerships, and follow-up appeared across several source groups as conditions of high-quality implementation.

The next phase in the development of Hungarian adult education and training should therefore focus not on repeatedly creating innovations, but on their institutional transmission. Progress should not be measured by whether learner-centered methods reappear in further projects, but by whether they become enduring components of educator preparation, the operation of training organizations, program financing, and evaluation. The transition from compliance to professional agency can be achieved when the system not only regulates how the delivery of training can be formally demonstrated, but also ensures that the professionals delivering it are capable of supporting adults' learning, the application of their knowledge, and their social participation in a professionally appropriate manner.

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Birhanu Haile AGEZEW & Gabor ERDEI

Adult education in Ethiopia – the effect on economic growth

Introduction – a general overview of Ethiopia

With about 135.9 million people (2025), Ethiopia is the second most populous nation in Africa after Nigeria, and one of the fastest-growing economies in the region, with a GDP growth rate of 9.2% growth in 2024/25. However, it also remains one of the poorest, with a per capita GDP of \$ 979. Illiterate rate is still very high: 60.4%, only 16 countries behind Ethiopia on this list. Barriers such as poverty, rural isolation, underfunded schools, and political instability continue to constrain literacy development (<https://www.iicba.unesco.org/en/ethiopia>). HDI 180 in the world rank out of 193 countries. Ethiopia's HDI value for 2023 is 0,497, which puts the country in the Low human development category (HDRU 2025). Between 2000 and 2023, Ethiopia's HDI value changed from 0,293 to 0,497, a change of 69.6 percent.

In the period of 2000 and 2023, Ethiopia's life expectancy at birth changed by 16,4 years, expected years of schooling changed by 5,0 years and mean years of schooling changed by 0,9 years. Expected year of schooling is 9.2 years, yet the mean year of schooling is 2.3 years.

Ethiopia's GNI per capita changed by about 241.1 percent between 2000 and 2023. Considering all these positive aspects, the country is still in the low categories in many aspects of economic and social factors and indicators (UNESCO 2025).

Ethiopia's state-led development model improved infrastructure and living standards. Outcomes include expanding access to nearby potable water to 60 million more people, doubling electricity access, and a 64% increase in child vaccinations. Between 2004 and 2016, these advances helped reduce the poverty rate from 39% to 24%, but the model relied on overvalued currency, unsustainable debt, and regulations that limited private investment. The approach hurt competitiveness, fueled inflation, and drained resources. It did not boost productivity enough to transform the economy or provide jobs for 1.8 million new job seekers annually, and poverty increased from 27 to 32% (2016-2021) (UNESCO 2025).

Human capital levels have stayed low, and 70% of the workforce depends on agriculture. Global trade integration remains limited, and growing budget constraints reduced social and capital spending. Multiple crises (war in Ukraine, Tigray conflict, droughts, economic imbalances) led to a debt default in 2023. Living standards deteriorated further amid double-digit inflation, and the Tigray conflict displaced 3 million people, resulting in large humanitarian and reconstruction needs (\$20 billion). About 15 million people are still reliant on food aid (BTI 2026).

The government embarked on comprehensive macroeconomic reform in July 2024, shifting to market-determined exchange rates, removing selected current account restrictions, and introducing a new interest-rate based monetary policy framework. Reforms are supported by IMF and World Bank financing, and G-20 debt relief. While the official and parallel exchange rate spread has narrowed from over 100%, it has persisted at around 15% with occasional spikes with remaining market inefficiencies, including surrender requirement on exporters incentivizing continued use of the parallel market. Ethiopia needs to sustain reforms to translate economic improvements into tangible benefits for people: higher earnings, more productive jobs, and better public services (BTI 2026).

This study examines the effectiveness of adult education, so we won't go into detail about how adult education has developed and changed over the past decades. However, we should note that in the past decades, numerous domestic and international initiatives were launched for the purpose of adult education, aiming to strengthen Ethiopia's economic development and reflect in social changes. Such work was carried out by the World Bank or the DVV International office (DVV International 2024). The results related to these initiatives have been presented in numerous publications over the past period (Assefa, Y. et al. 2022). However, our work specifically examined the effectiveness of adult education.

The role of education and adult education in a Sub-Sahara country

In the context of dynamic technological environment, where it calls for adaptable work force, adult education programs have got an increasing demand as a strategy for expediting national development. In a broader sense, it is not merely a tool to address literacy and numeracy issues; it is rather an important strategy of acquiring knowledge, skills and competencies to function in day-to-day activities of citizens (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2016). It is evident that this sector of education, due to its functional orientation, has become a central to promote productivity particularly in emerging economies.

At global level, there is an increasing demand for functional adult education programs because of the dynamism of labor market structure. This implies that the importance of life long and continuous education programs are capitalized to stay fitted in the system of the labor market. As mentioned, due to the ever-changing labor market structure resulted because of technological advancements and requirements of the economy, one needs to stay updated in terms of knowledge and skills acquisition to remain competent and productive (ILO, 2019). Report from OECD showed that adult education programs are highly related to higher returns and earnings and stronger national development as these countries included adult education programs into their growth models (OECD, 2019). In a nutshell, adult education programs play tremendous role both in enhancing one's own productivity, which simultaneously increases earnings and strengthens the development of human capital and economic growth, which consequently resulted in national development.

In developing nations, adult education programs have been associated with basic development goals like issues of illiteracy (mainly reading, writing and arithmetic), gender issues and poverty reduction strategies (UNESCO, 2019). The report by UNESCO further highlighted that adult education and learning are important for social, economic and political improvements. The World Bank (2020) also noted that the development of necessary skills among adults has significant importance in economic and structural transformation.

In the continent of sub-Saharan region, adult illiteracy remains one among the top challenges of socio-economic development endeavors. Substantial portion of the population remain unable to read, write and perform arithmetic. Despite the existence of slight variations from nation to nation, illiteracy rate remains lower than the global average, which is about 13 percent (UNESCO, 2025) and falls at around fifty percent in most nations (UNESCO, 2025; Mtandi, 2024; Stata, 2023) considering the fact on the ground, The African Union, in its agenda 2063, plaid attention to adult education and lifelong learning as one of the foundations to human capital development and societal transformation (African Union, 2015). The initiatives for lifelong learning and adult education programs in the continent in general and the sub-Saharan region in particular is needed to bridge the gaps in basic literacy, develop vocational and entrepreneurial skills, to better function in adults' day to day activities and align with broader national development goals.

Ethiopia has been implementing a wide range of adult education initiatives in the forms of integrated functional adult literacy (IFAL) non-formal training to bridge illiteracy rates and improve livelihood and productivity among adult citizens who missed the opportunity to formal basic education (MoE, 2018). The implementation of adult education programs in the country contributed to improving the livelihood of several households in terms of enhancing agricultural productivity, easing adoption to agricultural tools, and reducing harmful traditional practices among others (Oljira & Hailu, 2021; Awgichew & Seyoum, 2017). Regardless, the program is suffering from structural and administrative challenges such as limited access, poor organizational structure, stakeholders' hesitation, unclear curriculum, poor facilitators' motivation, and unqualified trainers (Desalegn et.al, 2021; Negassa, 2019; Awgichew & Seyoum, 2017).

Even though, there is extensive body of research on the implementation, practice, status, challenges and livelihood outcomes of adult education programs in Ethiopia at micro level, for example (Oljira &

Hailu, 2021; Desalegn et.al, 2021; Negassa, 2019), there is limited empirical studies on the relationship between adult education and economic growth and its link to the broader national development. Some studies like Belina (2022) assessed the contribution of integrated functional adult literacy for livelihood improvement using qualitative study. Despite it coming up with a foundational finding that adult education enhances livelihood and increases income, it lacks methodological rigor to draw a valid conclusion. Besides, as the study was conducted in specific areas of the country, it makes it difficult to capture a holistic image of IFAL and its contribution to socio-economic development at country level. These gaps, therefore, underline the importance of conducting research of macroeconomic analysis how adult education is linked to the broader national economic goals. Accordingly, this study addresses this research gaps by assessing the macro level analyses of adult education program in Ethiopia and its effect on economic growth.

Research questions

As mentioned in the introduction section, there are several studies on adult education exploring its implementation, status and challenges for implementation in the existing body of literature. However, empirical studies that consider the measurable effect of adult education on economic growth in Ethiopia are scares. Considering bridging these gaps, this study formulates the following research questions.

- What are the trends of enrolment, years of schooling and graduations of adult education and training program in relation to GDP growth?
- What is the effect of adult education and training on GDP growth in Ethiopia?

Literature Review

As far as the relationship between education and development is concerned, there exist various theories and models that highlight the links between the two, specifically, with economic growth. Among others, human capital theory is among those theories that remain as a central framework for researching the relationships between education and development (Becker, 1964; Lucas, 1988; Romer, 1990). They conceptualized education as investment to improve productivity with the acquisitions and accumulations of important knowledge, skills and talents for growth. In this context, the notion of life-long and adult education has a tremendous stake in the accumulation of human capital that facilitates growth and development. Therefore, this research is based on the assumptions of human capital theory that specific educational variables like enrolment rates, graduation rates and years of schooling can be associated with economic growth measured by GDP per capita. Specific to the variables included, UNESCO (2019) in its report on its global report on adult learning and education revealed that enrolment and year of schooling have a quantitative advantage to increase human capital development, while turning into GDP growth heavily depends on the acquisitions of relevant skills and graduation quality of adult learners. Hence, this justifies the appropriateness of the inclusion of the variables into this empirical study.

Even though there are several research on the study of education-economic growth in general, direct empirical studies on the study of adult learning and economic growth are scares. Some of them affirm the importance of adult education programs in the accumulation of human capital, which in turn promotes growth and productivity (Aker et al., 2024; Stauvermann, 2018). The findings of individual studies from African countries on adult learning showed that it promotes livelihood practices, economic productivity and helps to manage other socio-economic problems (Davis et.al, 2012). They further noted that meaningful engagement in adult learning programs increases agricultural productivity and household income by more than 50 percent among farmers in east Africa.

Specific to the Ethiopian context, some few studies have been conducted in relation to the socio-economic impact of integrated functional adult literacy program. A study by Todo & Takahashi (2011) showed functional adult literacy program increases adult's biennial income by 60 to 160 USD at

grassroot level. A national level evaluation study also reported a positive effect of integrated functional adult literacy program on the livelihood of adult participants of the program. Similarly, Olijira and Hailu (2021) reported that the program positively impacted socio-economic status of the participants. From the above premises, the program has a strong social and economic impact at micro level. However, some scholars doubt the effectiveness of the education program in addressing economic challenges at national level mentioning policy, practice and strategy gaps in implementing it. At national level, according to a policy document and a meta- analysis study, IFAL is constrained due to lack of resources, institutional capacity and poor cooperation among stakeholders, which hinder the micro level socio-economic gains into measurable economic indicators (Assefa et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2016).

Methodology

This study employed longitudinal study to assess the relationship between adult education and economic growth in Ethiopia. A longitudinal is a study that repeatedly collects data over time to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between variables (Shah et al., 2023). It exclusively relied on the analysis time series data collected from 2011 to 2023 from different sources, mainly from WDI, 2024 and FDRE ministry of education annual statistical abstracts. it utilized both descriptive and inferential statistics in its analysis including means, St. Deviations and linear regression to observe any statistical significance on the effect of the explanatory variables on the dependent variable. In terms of variables, adult education enrolment rates 25+, graduation rates and years of schooling were used as explanatory variables, whereas GDPPC was used to measure economic growth.

1. Model Specification and Estimation

$$Y_t = c + b_1 X_{1t} + b_2 X_{2t} + b_3 X_{3t} + e_t \dots \dots \dots (1)$$

Where:

- Y_t : Economic growth at time t measured by GDPPC
- X_{1t} : Adult education enrolment rate at time t
- X_{2t} : Graduation rate of adult learners
- X_{3t} : Population average years of schooling
- c: The constant term
- b_1, b_2, b_3 are coefficients of each independent variable, and
- e_t : Error

The model was estimated using ordinary least square (OLS) method, and level of significance was determined using p-values at 0.05 precision.

Results

This part of the study mainly discusses the major findings of the analyses from the data. It mainly comprises two elements. In the first place, the summary statistics and graphical output of the trend analysis of each variable is discussed followed by the estimation of the effect of each variable on economic growth.

Trends of enrolment, and graduations of adult education and training program

Figure 1 — Trends of enrolment, and graduations of adult education and training program

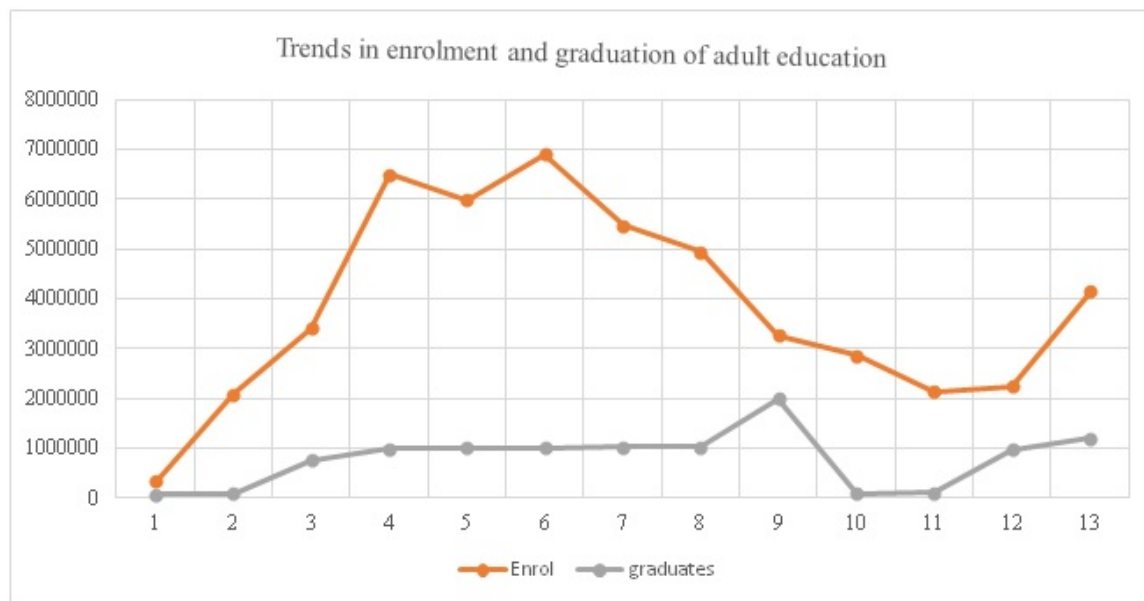
**Trends of GDP per capita growth**

Figure 2 — Trends of GDP per capita growth

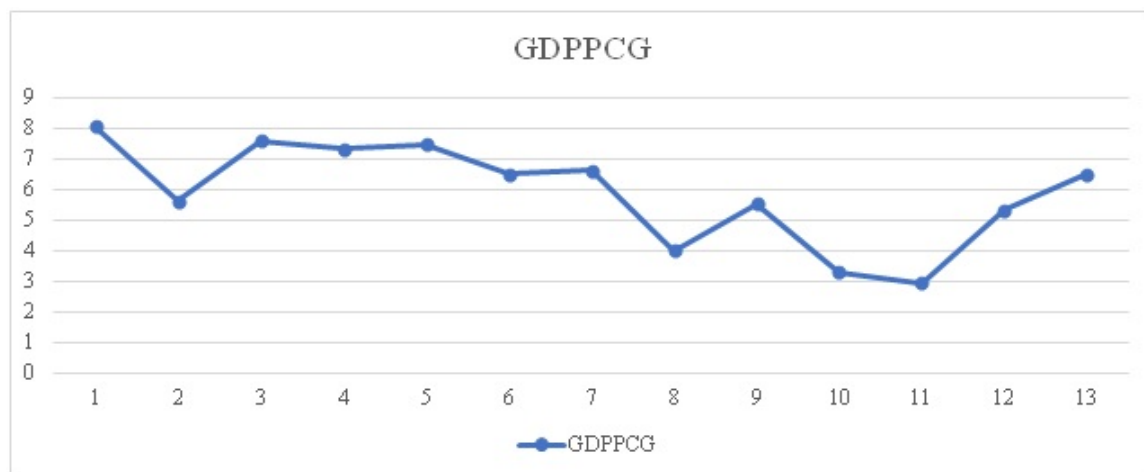
**Summary Statistics**

Figure 3 — Summary Statistics

Variables	Valid	Missing	Mean	SD	95% Confidence Interval		Minimum	Maximum
					Upper	Lower		
GDPPCG	13	0	5.900	1.659	2.035	0.970	2.922	8.054
ErI_rate	13	0	0.035	0.019	0.024	0.013	0.004	0.065
Gra_rate	13	0	0.490	0.855	1.343	0.115	0.031	3.290
YS	13	0	8.585	0.128	0.166	0.066	8.300	8.700

In figure 1, the enrolment and graduation trends of adult education program, which contextually called integrated functional adult literacy program, is presented. As to enrolment, the pattern clearly shows a fluctuating trend during the period covered. During the initial years, enrolment has increased at an increasing pace, which indicates a rapid growth of participation of adult in integrated functional adult literacy programs. The trend reached its peak during the years between 2014 to 2016, despite a slight downward sloping that was observed in 2015. A continuous downward shift was observed in the enrolment trend of the education program between the years 2017 to 2022. In 2023 there was a renewed upward shift of enrolment trends, which indicates a recovery of possible growth in adults' education participation. Pertaining graduation rates, the pattern revealed the existence of steady trend, especially in the first 8 years between 2011 to 2017/18. In the years 2017/2018, graduation rate reached its highest point followed by a down trending pattern in the years 2020 and 2021. Afterwards, there seems to be a promising trend of growth in the graduation rates.

Figure 2 revealed the trend of GDP per capita growth spanning the years 2011 to 2023. The trend evidently indicated GDP per capita growth was fluctuating over those years between 3 to 8 percent annually. However, after the year 2021 onwards, there is a sustained growth on the GDP per capita per annum.

Figure 3 similarly shows the summary statistics of the variables included in the study, which revealed the mean, standard deviation, the minimum and maximum observations. Regarding GDP per capita growth, the dependent variable, the mean score ($M=5.9$, $SD=1.659$) shows, over the 13 years, the average growth of GDPPC was 5.9 percent with possible deviation of around 1.7 percent. On the other hand, the maximum value indicated that over the years, GDPPC ranged between 2.92 to 8.05. Regarding enrolment rate, the mean value ($M=0.035$, $SD=0.019$) shows the average adults participating in adult education programs accounts about 3.5 percent, which shows significant number of adults still do not access it. Likewise, the mean scores ($M=0.49$, $SD=0.85$) and ($M=0.85$, $SD=0.128$) for graduation rate and average years of schooling respectively depict that only 49 percent of the total enrolled adults reached graduation and completed successfully the training program. While the remaining 51 percent do not complete the training, which revealed the existence of higher dropouts arising from socioeconomic and political reasons.

Figure 4 — The Effect of Adult Education on GDP Per Capita Growth (Model Estimations)

Variables	β	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
C	23.102	25.861	.893	.466
Enr_rate	22.327	20.158	1.108	.383
Gra_rate	6.615	.798	8.287	.014*
YS	-2.430	3.060	-.794	.510

*Note: Dependent Variables: GDPPC * indicates statistical significance*

The above figure shows the effect of adult education and training programs on GDP Growth. As can be seen clearly three explanatory variables, namely, enrolment rate, graduation rate and years of schooling were used to predict the effect of AEP on economic growth, measured by GDPPCG. The standardized coefficients ($\beta=.158$, $p>0.05$) for adult enrolments, ($\beta=1.029$, $p<0.05$) from adult graduation rate and ($\beta=-.130$, $p>0.05$) for years of schooling show that enrolment rate and years of schooling are not statistically significant, which reflects there is no strong evidence to conclude that these variables have effects on GDP growth. On the other hand, graduation rate has a strong statistical significance, meaning that it affects GDP growth.

Conclusion

The current study investigated the link between integrated functional adult literacy program and economic growth in Ethiopia. The study employed a multiple regression model to estimate the effect of the independent variables over the dependent variable. It revealed that enrolments and years of schooling were not statistically significant in predicting the relationship between adult education program and economic growth. On the other hand, graduation rates had a strong and statistically significant effect on economic growth. This relationship further means that adults who successfully complete their study program in the integrated functional adult literacy tend to be more productive than those who didn't. It also shows that completion rate has more importance in converting the functional knowledge and practical skills acquired into their daily activities and eventually into meaningful socio-economic outcomes. All in all, it underlined the importance of improving the program efficiency and effectiveness, beyond a mere increase the participants to better support economic growth. Therefore, these findings may imply that policy initiatives should be in place to prioritize not only enrolments but also the program's efficiency and effectiveness. Monitoring and evaluation should also be developed to make sure that adult learners complete the program courses successfully.

Limitations

Even though the findings of the current study are informative, it is subject to numerous limitations arise due to several reasons. Initially, the estimation was based on thirteen years of data collected from secondary sources which may not fully provide long range casual relationships between adult education and economic growth. Secondly, even though it is proper to use the indicators as proxy to measure adult education, the data quality and availability in some cases may pose a challenge. Besides, it would have been worthwhile if a range of educational and economic related variables were included. Thirdly, the specified model and its estimation technique may not fully capture the casual relationships between the explanatory and response variables treated in the study. Therefore, one who reads this study needs to consider these limitations in interpreting the findings. The authors highly recommend further research using wide range of data and advanced econometric techniques.

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Shaping Competence Development Through Innovative Work-Based Learning

Qualitative Insights from HR Professionals in Multinational Enterprises

Introduction

With rapid changes in technology and job expectations, many multinational enterprises find that developing employee competence is more important than ever. As a result, traditional classroom-based training is often no longer sufficient, increasing interest in more flexible and sustainable forms of work-based learning (WBL).

Work-based learning views learning as taking place within everyday work activities, allowing employees to develop competence through experience, problem-solving, and reflection rather than through isolated instruction (Kolb, 1984; Cole, 1989). In this sense, competence can be seen as a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped through ongoing interaction with work tasks and organizational environments (Hager et al., 2002). Research on innovative work-based learning has often focused more on formal structures and tools than on the learning mechanisms through which competence develops in everyday organizational practice. This limitation is especially noticeable in multinational enterprises, where these learning processes remain poorly understood.

Within organizations, human resource professionals play an important role. Because HR professionals are involved in organizational strategy, learning systems, and employee development, they strongly influence how work-based learning is understood, designed, implemented, and applied. Their work is not limited to administering training programs; it also includes creating environments that encourage reflection, experimentation, and knowledge sharing (Armstrong, 2020; Marsick & Watkins, 2003). By defining priorities and organizing learning opportunities, HR professionals influence how learning is built into work processes and how competence development is supported over time.

Organizational culture also shapes how competence development is understood. Learning practices are rooted in shared values, norms, and assumptions that influence how employees engage with learning opportunities and how organizations create and apply knowledge (Hofstede, 1980, 1993; Hall, 1969). Organizational learning theories emphasize that innovation in learning is closely linked to reflection, feedback, and the ability to question existing practices (Argyris & Schön, 1978). In this way, innovative WBL creates a setting in which employees can engage in experiential learning, challenge established routines, and contribute to organizational competence.

Innovation in work-based learning is also linked to how organizations create knowledge. From a knowledge-creation perspective, interaction, dialogue, and experiential learning are important in turning individual knowledge into shared organizational competence (Nonaka, 1988; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). By integrating learning into everyday work practices, innovative WBL supports continuous competence development through collaboration, shared problem-solving, and applying knowledge in real organizational settings.

These perspectives suggest that innovative work-based learning contributes to competence development by making learning part of everyday work, encouraging reflection and experimentation, and connecting individual development with broader organizational learning processes. However, how HR professionals in multinational enterprises actually understand and support these processes in practice remains unclear. This study addresses that gap by examining competence development through HR professionals' accounts. This is the focus of the present study.

This study addresses the following research question

How does innovative work-based learning shape employee competence development, as interpreted and put into practice by HR professionals in multinational enterprises?

Theoretical Background

Work-Based Learning and Experiential Learning

Work-based learning (WBL) is commonly understood as learning that occurs directly through engagement in work activities, where knowledge develops through participation in real tasks, challenges, and interactions within organizational settings. Experiential learning theory emphasizes that knowledge and competence develop through a cyclical process of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application (Kolb, 1984). This perspective shifts attention away from formal instruction and instead emphasizes everyday work activities as primary sites of learning, where individuals refine their understanding through ongoing practice.

Early organizational learning research similarly highlights the importance of learning through participation and problem-solving rather than through detached instruction. Learning at work enables individuals to develop practical understanding by responding to concrete organizational situations, experimenting with solutions, and reflecting on outcomes (Cole, 1989). Work-based learning is a continuous and context-dependent process closely tied to the realities of organizational work.

In adult learning theory, experiential and work-related learning is particularly relevant, as adult learners bring prior experience to learning situations and seek immediate applicability of knowledge (Knowles, 1984). Work-based learning responds to these characteristics by enabling learning through meaningful tasks and responsibilities, allowing competence to develop through engagement rather than transmission. Work-based learning can therefore be understood as a continuous and context-dependent process closely tied to organizational practice.

Competence Development as a Dynamic Process

Competence development is increasingly understood as a dynamic process involving the application of knowledge, skills, and attitudes across varying work contexts. Competence is shaped through interaction with organizational demands, social relationships, and contextual factors rather than being developed solely through formal training interventions (Hager et al., 2002).

Competence develops over time as individuals engage in work activities that require judgment, problem-solving, and adaptation. Work-based learning supports this process by providing opportunities for learning through action, feedback, and reflection, enabling individuals to integrate experience into their professional practice. Instead of viewing competence as a fixed outcome, WBL conceptualizes it as an evolving capability shaped through participation in everyday organizational practices.

Organizational learning theory further supports this view by highlighting that learning involves questioning existing assumptions and adjusting behavior in response to experience. Argyris and Schön's (1978) concept of single-loop and double-loop learning highlights the role of reflection and questioning in competence development. Through work-based learning, individuals are exposed to situations that encourage not only incremental improvement but also deeper reconsideration of practices, contributing to stronger, more adaptive competence.

Innovation in Learning and Knowledge Creation

Innovation in work-based learning can be understood as a shift away from standardized training approaches toward more flexible, context-sensitive learning practices. Innovative WBL practices emphasize learning through collaboration, experimentation, and knowledge sharing within work processes. These practices build competence by supporting learning through direct experience and peer interaction in real work settings.

The knowledge-creation perspective highlights how interaction and dialogue transform individual knowledge into organizational competence. Nonaka's (1988) middle-up-down management concept emphasizes the importance of dynamic knowledge flows between individuals and organizational levels. Building on this, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) describe knowledge creation as a socially embedded

process in which tacit and explicit knowledge are continuously transformed through shared practice and reflection.

WBL creates conditions that enable these knowledge creation processes to unfold within everyday organizational activities. By embedding learning in everyday work, organizations create opportunities for employees to contribute to collective learning and competence development. Innovation in WBL lies not only in using new tools or methods, but in rethinking how learning is integrated into work and how knowledge is generated and applied within organizations (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

The Role of HR Professionals in Shaping Learning Environments

Human resource professionals are central actors in shaping the conditions that enable work-based learning and competence development within organizations. Beyond administering formal training programs, HR professionals influence learning by designing systems, policies, and practices that support continuous development. Human resource management literature emphasizes HR's strategic role in aligning learning initiatives with organizational goals and fostering environments that encourage learning and development (Armstrong, 2020).

The concept of a learning organization further highlights the importance of organizational structures and cultures that support learning at multiple levels. Marsick and Watkins (2003) emphasize that learning-oriented organizations create opportunities for questioning, dialogue, and reflection, enabling individuals to develop competence through engagement with work. HR professionals contribute to these environments by facilitating access to learning opportunities and supporting practices that integrate learning in daily work activities.

In multinational enterprises, HR professionals operate within complex organizational and cultural contexts. Organizational culture, strategic priorities, and contextual limitations shape how they interpret innovation in learning and competence development. Examining HR professionals' accounts therefore provides insight into how innovative work-based learning is implemented and how competence development is supported through organizational learning systems rather than formal training alone.

Organizational Culture and Contextual Influences on Learning

Organizational culture strongly shapes learning and competence development through shared values, norms, and underlying assumptions that influence how learning is perceived, how knowledge is shared, and how individuals engage with learning opportunities. Cultural frameworks highlight that organizational practices, including learning and development, are shaped by broader cultural patterns related to communication, authority, and collaboration (Hofstede, 1980, 1993; Hall, 1969).

Organizational culture research emphasizes that learning practices cannot be understood independently of their cultural context. Ogbanna and Harris (1998) argue that culture shapes organizational behavior in subtle ways, influencing how learning initiatives are interpreted and implemented. In multinational enterprises, these cultural influences are particularly important, as learning practices must accommodate diverse expectations and organizational norms.

Innovative work-based learning operates within these cultural contexts, shaping and being shaped by organizational values and practices. Examining competence development through WBL necessitates careful consideration of the cultural and organizational contexts in which learning takes place. HR professionals, positioned within these environments, play a key role in navigating cultural influences and supporting learning practices that foster competence development across diverse organizational settings (Hofstede, 1993).

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design and aims to examine how innovative work-based learning contributes to competence development within multinational enterprises. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain deeper insight into learning processes and organizational practices as experienced and

interpreted by human resource professionals. This approach is particularly appropriate for examining complex social phenomena where meaning, context, and interpretation play a central role (Creswell, 2009).

Research Design and Data Collection

This study gathered empirical data through semi-structured interviews with HR professionals working in multinational enterprises. HR professionals were considered key informants given their direct involvement in the design, implementation, and oversight of organizational learning and development practices. A purposive sampling strategy was used to include participants actively engaged in learning and development activities within their organizations. The semi-structured format allowed in-depth exploration of participants' experiences while maintaining consistency across key topics related to work-based learning, innovation, and competence development. During the interviews, participants reflected on learning practices embedded in daily work processes, recent changes in training approaches, and the ways competence development is supported through routine organizational activities. Participation was voluntary, and all interviewees provided informed consent before data collection. The interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' permission. All interviews were transcribed prior to analysis.

The study is based on twelve semi-structured interviews with HR professionals representing twelve multinational enterprises operating in Hungary. The interview sample reflects a balanced gender distribution; Figure 1 provides an overview of participant characteristics.

Figure 1 — Characteristics of Interview Participants

No	Interviewee	Age	Gender	Work Experience (Years)
1	Interviewee 01	47	M	14
2	Interviewee 02	38	F	8
3	Interviewee 03	41	M	10
4	Interviewee 04	32	F	7
5	Interviewee 05	48	F	12
6	Interviewee 06	35	M	7
7	Interviewee 07	46	F	10
8	Interviewee 08	39	M	8
9	Interviewee 09	33	F	6
10	Interviewee 10	39	M	8
11	Interviewee 11	41	M	11
12	Interviewee 12	38	F	9

Source: Own compilation

Data Analysis

The interview material was analyzed using an inductive qualitative approach informed by grounded theory principles. This approach develops concepts directly from empirical data through systematic comparison rather than relying on predefined hypotheses (Glaser & Strauss, 2008). The analysis aimed to identify recurring patterns and underlying learning mechanisms that explain how competence development emerges through innovative work-based learning practices.

ATLAS.ti software supported the coding and organization of the interview material across all cases. The analytical process involved several stages, beginning with open coding and followed by developing higher-level categories through constant comparison across interviews. This process resulted in a thematic structure that captured key areas of work-based learning practices, competence development, and innovation in organizational learning. Figure 2 summarizes the main themes and related subthemes identified through this analysis, providing an overview of the core analytical categories.

Figure 2 — Overview of Main Themes and Subthemes Identified Through Interview Analysis

Main Theme	Related Subthemes
Work-Based Learning Practices	On-the-job training approaches; training methods; feedback and evaluation; success stories
Competence Development	Competence evaluation; development strategy; investment in development; role of managers
Innovation in Learning	Definition of innovation; innovation in HR; strategic HR programs; fostering innovation
Learning Support Mechanisms	Development tools and platforms; motivation for learning; benefits of learning

Source: Own compilation based on qualitative interview analysis using ATLAS.ti

Ethical Considerations

The Ethical Review Board of the Faculty of Education and Psychology at Eötvös Loránd University granted ethical approval for the study (Approval No. 2024/285).

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis, the researcher paid particular attention to maintaining transparency and consistency throughout the research process. Systematic coding procedures and constant comparison across cases supported the credibility of the findings. The researcher's continued engagement with the data and familiarity with the organizational contexts contributed to a deeper interpretation of participants' accounts. These strategies align with established qualitative research standards for ensuring rigor and analytical depth (Cohen et al., 2000; Creswell, 2009).

Findings

The interview data point to four interrelated mechanisms through which innovative work-based learning contributes to competence development in multinational enterprises. These mechanisms emerged through iterative coding and comparison across the interview material, reflecting recurring patterns in how learning processes are experienced within organizations. The findings do not focus on formal training programs; instead, they examine how competence development is constructed through learning processes embedded in organizational practice.

Embedding Learning in Everyday Work Practices

One of the most prominent patterns across the interviews relates to the integration of learning into everyday work activities. HR professionals described a deliberate shift away from formal, classroom-based training toward learning that occurs through participation in real tasks, projects, and problem-solving situations. Learning was often described as happening during work itself, rather than as a separate activity that required time away from daily tasks.

“Most learning doesn’t happen in training rooms anymore. People learn while doing their daily tasks and solving real problems at work.” (Interviewee 03)

Participants consistently highlighted that competence development was most effective when employees engaged in challenging tasks that required them to apply existing knowledge in new contexts. Learning was embedded in project work, cross-functional collaboration, and task rotation, allowing employees to develop competence through experience. One of the HR professionals highlighted that “When employees work on real projects and face real challenges, they develop skills much faster than through formal training alone.” (Interviewee 06)

Embedding learning within daily work was considered especially important in dynamic organizational environments, where predefined training content can quickly lose relevance. By situating learning within everyday work, organizations created conditions in which competence development could evolve in response to changing demands rather than being constrained by fixed training curricula.

Experimentation, Reflection, and Feedback as Learning Mechanisms

Another important pattern identified in the data concerns the role of experimentation, reflection, and feedback in learning processes. HR professionals described learning as an ongoing process involving experimentation, reflection on outcomes, and adjustment based on feedback.

Innovative work-based learning created opportunities for employees to test new ideas and approaches without immediate negative consequences. HR professionals noted that competence development was supported when organizations encouraged learning from mistakes and treated unsuccessful attempts as part of the learning process. Reflection was often facilitated informally through team discussions, project debriefings, or one-to-one conversations rather than through formal evaluation procedures.

Feedback played a central role in linking experience to competence development. Participants emphasized that timely and constructive feedback helped employees make sense of their experiences and translate them into learning. Through iterative cycles of action and reflection, employees refined their skills, deepened their understanding, and developed more adaptive forms of competence. Another participant emphasized that “Feedback after projects is very important. Talking about what worked and what didn’t helps employees understand how they can improve.” (Interviewee 09)

HR-Enabled Structures and Conditions for Innovative Work-Based Learning

The data further point to the importance of HR-enabled structures and organizational conditions in supporting work-based learning. HR professionals described their role as creating conditions that allow learning to take place within organizational routines. This included providing time for learning within work schedules, legitimizing learning activities as part of work, and encouraging managers to support learning-oriented practices.

As one HR professional noted, “Our role is to make sure learning has space in daily work. We try to give people time and support so learning is seen as part of the job, not something extra.” (Interviewee 07)

Their role extended beyond training delivery to include designing environments that support continuous learning. This included fostering collaboration across departments, supporting mentoring relationships, and facilitating access to learning resources. HR professionals also highlighted the importance of aligning learning practices with organizational strategy to ensure that competence development was relevant and valued.

In multinational enterprises, HR professionals often had to balance standardized learning frameworks with local flexibility. The data indicate that innovative work-based learning was most effective when HR structures allowed flexibility while maintaining a shared learning orientation. As one participant explained, “We have common learning frameworks, but we also allow teams to adapt them to their local needs. That flexibility makes learning more effective.” (Interviewee 11)

From Individual Learning to Organizational Competence

Another pattern in the data relates to how individual learning translates into organizational competence. HR professionals emphasized that competence development extends beyond individual skill acquisition and becomes organizationally meaningful when learning is shared, integrated, and sustained over time.

Participants described how they shared, documented, and integrated individual learning experiences into organizational practices. Innovative work-based learning supported these processes by encouraging collaboration and dialogue across teams and organizational levels. As one HR professional noted, "Learning becomes really valuable when people share what they have learned with others. That's how individual experience turns into something the whole organization can use." (Interviewee 04)

This collective dimension of competence development was considered essential for sustaining organizational adaptability and innovation. HR professionals highlighted that when learning remained isolated at the individual level, its impact was limited. In contrast, when learning was embedded in organizational processes and shared across the organization, it contributed to organizational competence development and long-term capability building. As another participant emphasized, "If learning stays with one person, the impact is limited. When it becomes part of how we work as an organization, it supports long-term competence and improvement." (Interviewee 12)

The findings show that competence development is shaped through interconnected processes that embed learning in work, support experimentation and reflection, enable learning through organizational structures, and extend individual learning into collective organizational capability.

Discussion

This study examined how innovative work-based learning contributes to competence development in multinational enterprises, as interpreted by HR professionals. The findings indicate that competence development takes shape through interconnected learning mechanisms taking place within everyday work, rather than through isolated training interventions. The study contributes to existing work-based learning and competence development literature by shifting attention from learning structures toward learning processes, highlighting how competence is constructed within organizational contexts.

A central contribution of this study is reconceptualizing competence development as a process integrated into work rather than an outcome of formal training. Consistent with experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), the findings demonstrate that competence develops through engagement with real work tasks, problem-solving, and participation in organizational activities. At the same time, the findings extend experiential learning perspectives by showing that these processes are not only individual but are also structured and supported at the organizational level. Work-based learning functions as an organizational learning mechanism through which competence development is continuously shaped in response to changing work demands.

The findings also contribute to competence development theory by reinforcing the view of competence as dynamic and context-dependent (Hager et al., 2002). Instead of viewing competence as a predefined set of skills delivered through training, HR professionals described it as evolving through cycles of action, reflection, and feedback. This aligns with organizational learning theory, particularly the distinction between single-loop and double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Innovative work-based learning creates conditions in which employees not only refine existing practices but also question underlying assumptions, enabling deeper forms of learning and more adaptive competence development.

A key theoretical insight of the study concerns the role of innovation in learning. Innovation in work-based learning was less about introducing new technologies or formal programs and more about reconfiguring how learning is integrated into daily work. This finding resonates with the knowledge-creation perspective, which emphasizes learning as a socially grounded process involving interaction, dialogue, and shared practice (Nonaka, 1988; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). By embedding learning

in everyday work, organizations facilitate the transformation of individual experience into collective knowledge and organizational competence. The study thus contributes to learning theory by conceptualizing innovative work-based learning as a pathway for organizational knowledge creation rather than as a set of discrete learning interventions.

The findings also clarify HR professionals' role in competence development. Existing human resource management literature highlights HR's strategic role in supporting learning and development (Armstrong, 2020; Marsick & Watkins, 2003). This study extends that perspective by demonstrating how HR professionals act as learning architects who shape the organizational conditions under which work-based learning occurs. Rather than acting primarily as training providers, HR professionals influence competence development by shaping conditions that support learning at work. This conceptualization moves beyond functional views of HR toward a more process-oriented understanding of HR's role in organizational learning.

Organizational culture emerges as a key contextual factor shaping how work-based learning and competence development occur. Consistent with cultural frameworks (Hofstede, 1980, 1993; Hall, 1969), the findings suggest that shared values and norms shape learning practices and influence employees' willingness to engage in learning, experimentation, and knowledge sharing. In multinational enterprises, these cultural influences add complexity to designing and implementing innovative work-based learning. The study contributes to organizational culture theory by showing how cultural and organizational contexts mediate competence development through work-based learning, rather than making it universally transferable.

Taken together, the findings contribute to theory by integrating perspectives from experiential learning, organizational learning, and knowledge creation to explain how innovative work-based learning shapes competence development. The study highlights that competence development is not a linear or standardized process but a socially grounded and organizationally supported phenomenon. By focusing on learning mechanisms rather than training formats, the paper offers a process-oriented understanding of competence development that complements and extends existing theoretical approaches.

This study also highlights the value of examining competence development through qualitative inquiry. By drawing on HR professionals' accounts, the research captures the interpretive and contextual dimensions of learning that are often overlooked in more outcome-oriented studies. This approach enables a deeper understanding of how learning is experienced in practice and how competence development is shaped within complex organizational environments.

Conclusion

This study examined how innovative work-based learning shapes competence development in multinational enterprises, drawing on qualitative insights from HR professionals. The findings indicate that competence development does not stem from isolated training activities but is shaped through learning mechanisms that are integrated into everyday work practices. By focusing on how learning unfolds in practice, the study offers a process-oriented understanding of competence development.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to work-based learning and competence development literature by integrating experiential learning, organizational learning, and knowledge-creation perspectives. Competence development is conceptualized as a dynamic, socially grounded process shaped by experimentation, reflection, feedback, and knowledge sharing within work environments. Innovative work-based learning functions as an organizational learning mechanism through which individual experience is transformed into collective competence. This shifts the focus away from static or skill-based conceptions of competence and highlights the importance of learning processes that occur in everyday work.

The study also clarifies HR professionals' role in organizational learning. Instead of viewing HR professionals primarily as providers of training, the findings position them as enablers and architects

of learning environments. By shaping organizational conditions that legitimize learning within work, support experimentation, and encourage reflection and collaboration, HR professionals influence how competence development unfolds over time. This perspective extends existing human resource management theory by emphasizing HR's role in shaping learning processes rather than merely managing learning programs.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest several implications for organizations seeking to support competence development in complex and dynamic environments. Organizations may benefit from rethinking learning strategies that prioritize formal training over learning that is integrated into work. Creating organizational conditions that encourage experimentation, reflection, and feedback can enhance learning outcomes and support continuous development. In this context, HR professionals play a central role in legitimizing work-based learning and aligning learning practices with organizational goals, thereby strengthening organizational capacity to respond to change.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations typical of qualitative research. The findings are based on interviews with HR professionals and therefore reflect their interpretations of work-based learning and competence development. Although this perspective offers important insights into organizational learning processes, it does not capture the experiences of other organizational actors, such as employees or line managers. In addition, the study focuses on multinational enterprises, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other organizational contexts.

Future research may extend these findings by incorporating multiple perspectives, including those of employees and line managers. Longitudinal research designs would be particularly valuable for examining how competence development evolves through work-based learning practices. In addition, comparative studies across different organizational or institutional contexts could provide deeper insight into how contextual and cultural factors shape innovative work-based learning.

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The Fulbright Program In post-communist Central and Eastern Europe Comparative Study

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, Central and Eastern Europe has undergone profound political, economic, and social transformation; the collapse of socialist regimes in 1989–1991 opened the region to intensified engagement with Western institutions, ideas, and networks. Among the instruments facilitating this transition, educational exchange programs have played a particularly significant, though often underexamined, role. Established in 1946, the Fulbright Program emerged as one of the most enduring mechanisms of academic diplomacy, designed to promote mutual understanding through scholarly mobility.¹ In the post-communist context, its expansion into Central and Eastern Europe created new channels for intellectual exchange, institutional reform, and transatlantic integration.

This study examines the Fulbright Program as a strategic instrument of international influence, focusing on its operation in selected post-communist countries – Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, and Bulgaria – while situating these cases in comparison with the more institutionally mature German model. The central argument is that Fulbright's impact cannot be reduced to individual mobility outcomes alone; rather, it operates through multi-layered diffusion mechanisms that reshape academic systems, professional practices, and policy environments over time.

At the core of this analysis is the concept of soft power, defined as a state's ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction, credibility, and the co-optation of preferences rather than coercion.² Educational exchange programs such as Fulbright represent a paradigmatic example of this mechanism: by facilitating sustained interpersonal contact, exposure to institutional models, and participation in transnational networks, they generate long-term alignment in values, norms, and practices. Unlike traditional diplomatic tools, these effects are indirect, cumulative, and often only visible over extended time horizons.

In post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, soft power is particularly relevant. During the Cold War, academic exchanges were limited, politically constrained, and often ideologically monitored.³ Nevertheless, even small-scale programs created openings for intellectual engagement with Western scholarship. After 1989, the rapid expansion and institutionalization of Fulbright commissions across the region transformed these limited contacts into systematic channels of knowledge transfer and elite socialization. Participants returned not only with academic credentials but also with new pedagogical approaches, research methodologies, and professional norms, which they introduced into domestic institutions.⁴ Over time, these processes contributed to the internationalization of higher education, the development of civil society, and the alignment of national systems with broader Euro-Atlantic structures.

This study adopts a comparative approach to capture variation in how these mechanisms operate across different national contexts. While all cases share a common post-socialist trajectory, they differ in the timing of program establishment, the scale of participation, institutional capacity, and program design. Poland demonstrates the effects of long-term participation and alumni critical mass; the Czech Republic illustrates professionalized program delivery and pedagogical diffusion; Romania highlights continuity

¹U.S. Department of State, *The Fulbright Program: A Brief History* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, various years).

²Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

³Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

⁴Giles Scott-Smith, *Networks of Empire: The U.S. State Department's Foreign Leader Program in the Netherlands, France, and Britain 1950–1970* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2008).

under constraint followed by rapid expansion; and Bulgaria represents a smaller-scale but high-impact model centered on capacity-building and grassroots engagement. Germany, by contrast, provides a benchmark of institutional depth and mature transatlantic integration.

By analyzing these cases together, the dissertation advances two broader contributions. Empirically, it provides a systematic account of Fulbright's role in shaping post-communist academic and policy environments. Theoretically, it refines our understanding of soft power by demonstrating how educational diplomacy operates through multiple, context-dependent pathways, including elite network formation, institutional partnerships, and societal-level diffusion. In doing so, it argues that the effectiveness of soft power is contingent not only on the resources invested but also on the interaction between program design and domestic institutional structures.

Ultimately, this study positions the Fulbright Program as more than an exchange initiative: it is a long-term mechanism of transnational influence that has contributed, subtly but significantly, to the reconfiguration of Central and Eastern Europe within the post-Cold War international order.

Poland: Early Entry, Post-1989 Expansion, and Regional Critical Mass (1959 – present)

Poland is a distinctive case because it joined the Fulbright Program early, in 1959. This long temporal horizon is analytically significant: sustained participation increases the likelihood that alum communities reach critical mass, enabling self-reinforcing networks through mentoring, institutional brokerage, and reputational accumulation.

Following 1989, the program gained renewed strategic importance, and the establishment of the Polish–U.S. Fulbright Commission in 1996 consolidated governance arrangements suited to a democratic, outward-oriented higher education system. Polish Fulbright engagement has been particularly robust in research-oriented fields, especially in STEM disciplines, aligning with national innovation and research policy priorities.⁵

From a diplomatic perspective, Poland illustrates how educational exchange contributes indirectly to Euro-Atlantic integration by cultivating durable trust and cooperation among academic, policy, and research elites. These dynamics are observable in several soft power outcomes:

- Fulbright participation is directly reflected in the careers of confirmed alums such as Jerzy Buzek, who, as a scientist and later Prime Minister of Poland and President of the European Parliament, exemplifies the intersection of academic mobility, scientific expertise, and political leadership within transatlantic networks.⁶ While his Fulbright experience represents only one element of a broader international career, it reflects the type of elite circulation that underpins soft power influence.
- Similarly, Michał Kleiber, a prominent engineer, former Minister of Science, and President of the Polish Academy of Sciences, participated in U.S.-based academic exchanges, including Fulbright-related mobility, contributing to long-term institutional cooperation between Polish and American research environments.⁷
- At the level of academic leadership, confirmed Fulbright alums such as Katarzyna Chałasińska-Macukow, former Rector of the University of Warsaw, demonstrate how alums contribute to institutional internationalization. Through leadership roles, such individuals have expanded partnerships with U.S. universities, strengthened English-language programs, and promoted participation in global research networks.⁸

Within the broader scholarly community, numerous Polish Fulbright alums, particularly in physics, biomedical sciences, and engineering, have built sustained collaborations with U.S. institutions. These

⁵Polish–U.S. Fulbright Commission, *Annual Report* (Warsaw: Polish–U.S. Fulbright Commission, various years).

⁶Jerzy Buzek, biographical profile and academic career records; see also European Parliament archives.

⁷Michał Kleiber, academic biography and international research collaborations.

⁸Katarzyna Chałasińska-Macukow, institutional biography, University of Warsaw.

include joint publications, co-supervision of doctoral students, and participation in international research consortia, often linked to EU funding frameworks such as Horizon Europe.⁹ Such activities reinforce Poland's integration into transatlantic epistemic communities and enhance its scientific visibility.

Fulbright alums frequently act as cultural and intellectual intermediaries by organizing bilateral conferences, academic exchanges, and public diplomacy initiatives, often in cooperation with organizations such as the Kościuszko Foundation.¹⁰ These efforts contribute to the diffusion of democratic norms, policy dialogue, and mutual understanding—core components of soft power.¹¹

Finally, the reciprocal presence of American scholars in Poland and Polish scholars in the United States fosters long-term interpersonal trust and positive mutual perceptions. These people-to-people interactions extend beyond formal diplomacy and illustrate how Fulbright serves as a durable soft-power instrument embedded in academic and policy networks.

Within the regional comparison, Poland stands as the clearest example of the “critical mass” mechanism, in which alumni effects become visible at the institutional and policy levels rather than remaining confined to individual careers. In this sense, Fulbright functions not only as an educational exchange program but also as a long-term instrument of soft power, shaping norms, networks, and cooperative practices across the transatlantic space.

The Czech Republic: Post-Transition Institutionalization and Professionalization (1991 – present)

The Czech Fulbright Commission was founded in 1991, reflecting rapid institutionalization in the immediate post-transition period. The program operates under the auspices of the Czech Fulbright Commission, within a co-funded governance framework involving Czech educational authorities and U.S. partners. Its portfolio encompasses students, lecturers, researchers, teachers, and other professionals, demonstrating a high degree of programmatic diversification.

A salient empirical feature of the Czech case is the prominence of English Teaching Assistant (ETA) programming, particularly since the 2000s. Structured orientations, cohort-based training, and mid-year professional development activities indicate an emphasis on standardization and the diffusion of pedagogy. Such features increase the likelihood that teaching practices and institutional norms spread beyond elite universities to regional institutions, including partnerships with universities such as Charles University and Masaryk University. Cumulative exchange figures reported by the Commission demonstrate substantial two-way mobility over three decades.¹²

From a soft power perspective, several mechanisms are evident. First, the ETA program functions as a key vector of cultural diplomacy: American participants are embedded in Czech classrooms and local communities, where they not only teach language skills but also transmit cultural norms, pedagogical practices, and informal understandings of U.S. society. This sustained grassroots engagement contributes to favorable perceptions of the United States and reinforces the attractiveness that is central to soft power.¹³

From a soft power perspective, several mechanisms are evident. First, the ETA program functions as a key vector of cultural diplomacy: American participants are embedded in Czech classrooms and local communities, where they not only teach language skills but also transmit cultural norms, pedagogical practices, and informal understandings of U.S. society. This sustained grassroots engagement

⁹European Commission, *Horizon Europe Programme Guide* (Brussels: European Union, 2021).

¹⁰Kościuszko Foundation, *Programs and Exchanges Overview*.

¹¹Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

¹²Czech Fulbright Commission, *Program Statistics and Annual Reports* (Prague: Czech Fulbright Commission, various years).

¹³Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

contributes to favorable perceptions of the United States and reinforces the attractiveness that is central to soft power.

Czech Fulbright alums frequently act as intermediaries in transatlantic academic and professional networks. Graduates have contributed to the internationalization of Czech higher education by developing joint research projects, organizing bilateral academic conferences, and facilitating institutional partnerships with U.S. universities. These activities enhance the global visibility of Czech institutions and embed them more deeply within Euro-Atlantic knowledge networks.

Third, the professionalization of program delivery, evident in structured training, alum engagement, and institutional coordination, amplifies soft power effects by ensuring continuity and scalability. Alum networks supported by the Commission often organize public lectures, workshops, and outreach initiatives, thereby extending the impact of exchange beyond the duration of individual fellowships. Such sustained engagement contributes to the formation of durable epistemic communities linking Czech and American scholars and professionals.

Finally, the reciprocal mobility of Czech and American participants fosters long-term interpersonal trust and shared professional norms. These people-to-people connections extend into sectors such as education policy, civil society, and research administration, where informal networks often facilitate cooperation more effectively than formal diplomatic channels. In this sense, the Czech case shows how professionally managed exchange programs can translate into diffuse yet persistent influence at both institutional and societal levels.

Analytically, the Czech Republic exemplifies early post-1989 consolidation combined with professionalized program delivery, illustrating how governance stability and portfolio diversification enhance institutional embeddedness. At the same time, its strong emphasis on pedagogical exchange, particularly through the ETA model, highlights a distinct pathway of soft power diffusion that operates not only through elite networks but also through broad-based educational and societal engagement.

Romania: Continuity under Constraint and Post-Transition Expansion (1960 – present)

The Fulbright Program was established in Romania in 1960, when the country was firmly embedded within the socialist bloc. Romania's accession nevertheless represented a rare form of cultural and academic opening toward the United States during the Cold War. Until 1993, the U.S. Embassy in Bucharest administered the program, reflecting both diplomatic sensitivity and limited institutional autonomy.

During the 1960s, Romanian Fulbright grantees primarily pursued studies in the humanities and social sciences, fields offering comparatively greater ideological flexibility. American scholars in Romania focused on linguistics, history, and cultural studies. Throughout the 1970s, the program persisted under increasing political supervision, remaining one of the few institutionalized channels of academic exchange. The 1980s saw declining participation due to repression and economic crisis, yet the program survived, preserving minimal but crucial international academic linkages.

From a soft-power perspective, even this limited exchange had meaningful effects. First, the program functioned as a controlled but significant channel of cultural diplomacy, exposing Romanian scholars to Western academic norms and intellectual frameworks. For instance, intellectuals such as Andrei Pleșu, who later became Minister of Culture and Foreign Affairs, were part of broader transatlantic intellectual exchange networks that overlapped with Fulbright-type mobility and contributed to post-1989 cultural and diplomatic reorientation.¹⁴

American Fulbright scholars in Romania acted as cultural intermediaries, introducing alternative pedagogical practices and scholarly approaches in institutions such as the University of Bucharest and

¹⁴ Andrei Pleșu, *Minima Moralia* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1988); see also biographical records on post-1989 government service.

Babeş-Bolyai University.¹⁵ Even under surveillance, these interactions fostered micro-level trust and intellectual exchange, illustrating how soft power operates through attraction and credibility rather than coercion.¹⁶

The 1989 regime change marked a decisive turning point: participation expanded rapidly, disciplinary scope widened, and demand increased sharply. Full institutionalization occurred in 1993 with the establishment of the Romanian–U.S. Fulbright Commission. This shift created a stable legal and organizational framework, enabling long-term expansion and consolidating Fulbright as a central pillar of U.S.–Romanian academic and cultural relations.¹⁷

In the post-1990 period, soft power effects became more visible and multidimensional. Romanian Fulbright alumni have contributed to higher education reform and internationalization. For example, Daniel David, Rector of Babeş-Bolyai University and a Fulbright alumnus, has played a key role in promoting international research standards and global academic integration.¹⁸

Alumni networks have facilitated sustained institutional partnerships with U.S. universities, contributing to joint research, dual-degree initiatives, and participation in EU-funded programs such as Horizon Europe.¹⁹ These activities enhance Romania's integration into transatlantic knowledge networks. Fulbright alumni have contributed to civil society and policy development. Figures such as Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, although not exclusively defined by Fulbright participation, illustrate how internationally trained scholars have shaped governance reform, anti-corruption discourse, and public policy debates in post-communist Romania.²⁰

Finally, people-to-people exchanges have generated long-term interpersonal networks that extend into academia, public administration, and international organizations. These sustained relationships reinforce mutual trust and contribute to the diffusion of democratic norms and professional practices, demonstrating the long-term societal embedding of soft power.

In this sense, Fulbright has functioned both as a bridge across Cold War divisions and as a post-transition mechanism for integrating Romania into Euro-Atlantic academic and policy communities. Beyond individual academic careers, the Romanian Fulbright Program has contributed significantly to the modernization of Romanian higher education institutions. Since the 1990s, many returning scholars have introduced new curricula, interdisciplinary teaching methods, and research management practices inspired by their experiences in the United States. These innovations have supported the gradual alignment of Romanian universities with international academic standards, particularly following Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007. In this respect, Fulbright has complemented broader European higher education reforms by strengthening institutional capacity and promoting a culture of academic excellence. The program has also facilitated the international visibility of Romanian research. Numerous Fulbright alumni have become principal investigators on multinational research projects, served on international editorial boards, and established collaborative laboratories and research centers. Such activities have increased the global competitiveness of Romanian universities while simultaneously reinforcing bilateral scientific cooperation between Romania and the United States. Rather than producing immediate structural transformation, Fulbright has generated cumulative institutional change through successive cohorts of internationally connected scholars.

An additional dimension concerns leadership development. A considerable proportion of Romanian Fulbright alums have subsequently assumed positions as university rectors, deans, department heads,

¹⁵University of Bucharest and Babeş-Bolyai University, institutional histories and international cooperation reports.

¹⁶Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

¹⁷Romanian–U.S. Fulbright Commission, *Annual Reports and Program History* (Bucharest: Fulbright Romania, various years).

¹⁸Daniel David, academic biography and Fulbright alumni records; Babeş-Bolyai University.

¹⁹European Commission, *Horizon Europe Programme Guide* (Brussels: European Union, 2021).

²⁰Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, *The Quest for Good Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

senior researchers, or government advisors. Their international experience has often informed strategic decisions regarding university governance, quality assurance, research evaluation, and international partnerships. Consequently, the program's influence extends beyond the individual level to the institutional and policy levels, where alums have acted as multipliers of internationally acquired knowledge and professional norms.

The Romanian case also illustrates the interaction between American soft power and European integration. While EU accession provided the formal institutional framework for educational reform, Fulbright supplied complementary forms of intellectual capital, professional networks, and intercultural competencies that enabled Romanian scholars to participate more effectively in international academic communities. In this sense, American and European forms of internationalization have functioned as mutually reinforcing rather than competing processes. From a cultural diplomacy perspective, Fulbright has helped reshape Romania's international image. Romanian scholars returning from the United States have frequently served as informal ambassadors of bilateral cooperation, participating in public lectures, professional associations, policy forums, and alumni initiatives. Likewise, American scholars returning from Romania have enhanced knowledge of Romanian history, language, and culture within the United States, thereby broadening mutual understanding beyond official diplomatic channels. The resilience of the Romanian Fulbright Program is particularly noteworthy. Unlike many exchange initiatives that experienced interruptions during periods of political instability, Fulbright maintained continuity across fundamentally different political regimes—from state socialism to democratic transition and European integration. This continuity strengthened institutional trust and created long-term channels of academic cooperation that proved adaptable to changing geopolitical contexts.

Overall, Romania represents continuity under political constraint, followed by rapid institutional expansion. During the communist period, Fulbright remained one of the few enduring mechanisms of intellectual exchange with the West, preserving academic contacts despite ideological restrictions. After 1989, the establishment of the Romanian–U.S. Fulbright Commission transformed the program into a fully institutionalized instrument of bilateral cooperation, substantially increasing participation and disciplinary diversity.

Viewed through the analytical framework of soft power, the Romanian experience demonstrates that educational exchange programs generate influence not through immediate political outcomes but through the gradual accumulation of human capital, institutional partnerships, and transnational professional networks. Fulbright alumni have contributed to university modernization, the internationalization of research, public administration, civil society, and policy development, while American participants have strengthened the international visibility of Romanian scholarship and culture.

Compared with other Central and Eastern European countries, Romania occupies an intermediate position: it experienced stronger political constraints than Poland after the 1980s but developed a broader post-transition expansion than Bulgaria. Its experience demonstrates how sustained academic exchange can evolve from a limited diplomatic instrument during the Cold War into a comprehensive platform for educational modernization, institutional cooperation, and long-term cultural diplomacy. Consequently, the Romanian case confirms that Fulbright functions not only as a scholarship program but also as a durable mechanism of soft power, fostering mutual trust, democratic values, and enduring transatlantic academic partnerships.

Bulgaria: Institutionalization, ETA Dominance, and Peripheral Capacity-Building (1967 – present)

Bulgaria has participated in Fulbright-type exchanges since 1967, with full institutionalization achieved in 1993 through the creation of the Bulgarian–American Fulbright Commission. Public annual reporting enables longitudinal insight into program priorities and scale. A defining feature of the Bulgarian case is the dominance of English Teaching Assistantship (ETA) programming, which distinguishes it from more research-intensive models observed in countries such as Poland. Established in cooperation with domestic partners, including the America for Bulgaria Foundation, the ETA track represents a sustained

investment in English-language instruction and pedagogical modernization, particularly in regional institutions and secondary schools.²¹

From a soft power perspective, several mechanisms are evident. ETA participants function as grassroots agents of cultural diplomacy. Embedded in local communities, they contribute not only to language acquisition but also to the diffusion of cultural norms, teaching methodologies, and informal understandings of U.S. society. This localized engagement strengthens favorable perceptions of the United States and exemplifies the attraction-based dynamics central to soft power.²² Bulgarian Fulbright alumni have contributed to institutional development and academic internationalization. For example, scholars affiliated with institutions such as Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski have used Fulbright-supported mobility to establish research collaborations, develop English-language curricula, and expand participation in international academic networks.²³ While the overall scale remains smaller than in larger Central European cases, the relative impact at the institutional level is often more concentrated.

The program's engagement with cultural heritage and preservation represents an additional dimension of soft power. Fulbright-supported projects in areas such as history, archaeology, and cultural studies have facilitated collaboration between Bulgarian and American scholars, contributing to the international visibility of Bulgaria's cultural assets. This hybrid model, combining education, research, and heritage diplomacy, broadens the scope of influence beyond higher education into the cultural sector.

Alumni have participated in civil society and educational reform initiatives, particularly in curriculum development, teacher training, and community outreach. Although less visible at the high-policy level, these contributions are significant in a peripheral context, where capacity building at the regional and institutional levels has long-term developmental implications.

The cumulative effect of people-to-people exchanges has fostered durable interpersonal networks linking Bulgarian and American participants. These relationships extend into academic collaboration, NGO activity, and international project development, reinforcing trust and mutual understanding over time. Analytically, Bulgaria represents a small-scale but high-leverage case: limited volume combined with concentrated program design yields visible institutional and societal impact. Its strong emphasis on ETA programming highlights a distinct pathway of soft power diffusion, operating primarily through grassroots educational engagement and regional capacity-building rather than elite-driven network effects.

Germany: Reconstruction, Institutional Depth, and Transatlantic Elite Networks (1952 – present)

Germany represents one of the most institutionally developed and strategically significant Fulbright cases in Europe. The program was established in 1952 during postwar reconstruction, making it one of the earliest and most symbolically important Fulbright partnerships. Its administration is overseen by the German-American Fulbright Commission, which operates within a highly institutionalized and well-funded framework that reflects the centrality of transatlantic relations in German foreign and educational policy.²⁴

From the outset, the Fulbright Program in Germany was closely linked to broader efforts to stabilize politics, democratize, and integrate with the West during the early Cold War. Academic exchange functioned not only as an educational initiative but also as a mechanism of normative reorientation, introducing American academic models, liberal democratic values, and institutional practices into the West German higher education system. Over time, the program has expanded significantly in scale

²¹Romanian-U.S. Fulbright Commission, *Annual Report 2022* (Bucharest: Romanian-U.S. Fulbright Commission, 2023), 8–15; European Commission, *The European Higher Education Area in 2020: Bologna Process Implementation Report* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2020).

²²Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

²³Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, international cooperation and Fulbright participation records.

²⁴German-American Fulbright Commission, *Annual Reports and Program Overview* (Berlin: Fulbright Germany, various years).

and scope, encompassing students, researchers, teachers, and professionals across a wide range of disciplines. A defining feature of the German case is its strong emphasis on research excellence and institutional collaboration. Fulbright exchanges have been deeply embedded in Germany's dense network of universities and research institutions, including the Max Planck Society and the German Research Foundation. These connections have facilitated long-term scientific cooperation with leading U.S. universities, contributing to joint research projects, co-authored publications, and sustained mobility among academic elites.²⁵

From a soft power perspective, Germany exemplifies a mature, multilayered model of influence. The Fulbright Program has contributed to the formation of transatlantic elite networks, particularly among policymakers, academics, and public intellectuals. Notable alumni include Angela Merkel, who participated in an academic exchange in the United States early in her scientific career, and Jürgen Habermas, whose engagement with American academia significantly shaped his intellectual trajectory.²⁶ While their careers extend far beyond their Fulbright participation, they exemplify the type of transatlantic intellectual circulation that underpins long-term soft-power effects.

Fulbright alumni have played important roles in leadership and policy development within German higher education. Participants frequently serve as university rectors, research directors, and advisors within federal- and state-level education systems, where they contribute to the internationalization of German academia and the adoption of globally competitive research standards. These processes reinforce Germany's position within transatlantic knowledge networks and enhance its attractiveness as a partner in higher education and research.

The program has supported people-to-people diplomacy at scale. With tens of thousands of participants over several decades, the German Fulbright network is among the largest in the world. Alumni associations actively organize conferences, public lectures, and policy dialogues, often in cooperation with institutions such as the German Marshall Fund of the United States.²⁷ These activities sustain long-term engagement and reinforce shared political and cultural values. Fulbright exchanges have contributed to broader societal perceptions and mutual understanding between Germany and the United States. American participants in Germany engage with local communities, universities, and cultural institutions, while German participants bring back professional practices and perspectives shaped by their U.S. experience. This reciprocal exchange fosters trust and credibility, key components of soft power.²⁸ The German case demonstrates how Fulbright can operate as a stable, long-term instrument of soft power within a highly developed institutional environment. Unlike smaller or post-socialist cases, where impact is often concentrated in specific sectors, Germany exhibits a diffuse but deeply embedded influence across academia, policy, and civil society. Analytically, Germany represents a case of institutional depth and elite network consolidation, in which sustained funding, large-scale participation, and integration into national research structures produce long-term, self-reinforcing transatlantic linkages. Fulbright, in this context, functions not only as an exchange program but also as a core component of the broader architecture of U.S. – German relations.

Hungary in Comparative Perspective

The Hungarian case further enriches this comparative framework by illustrating how educational diplomacy functions within a post-socialist context marked by both strong transatlantic aspirations and recurring political and institutional transformations. The Fulbright Program in Hungary was formally established in 1978 through a bilateral agreement between the Hungarian People's Republic and the United States, making Hungary one of the earliest socialist states to institutionalize sustained academic

²⁵Max Planck Society and German Research Foundation, international collaboration reports.

²⁶Angela Merkel, biographical and academic records; Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

²⁷German Marshall Fund of the United States, program descriptions and alumni initiatives.

²⁸Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

exchange with the United States during the Cold War.²⁹ The Hungarian case occupies a distinctive position within the broader Central and Eastern European Fulbright landscape, combining elements of both continuity and transformation. Like Poland and Romania, Hungary maintained limited but symbolically important academic exchanges with the United States from the late 1970s onward. Compared to several neighboring countries, however, Hungary's relatively reform-oriented political environment and gradual economic liberalization created more favorable conditions for sustained intellectual engagement with Western academic institutions. Consequently, the Fulbright Program in Hungary evolved not only as a mechanism of educational mobility but also as part of a broader process of controlled opening toward the West during the final decades of the Cold War.

This interpretation is supported by evidence drawn from archival sources, quantitative survey data, and qualitative interviews. Archival research demonstrates that the implementation of the 1977 Hungarian–American Agreement on Cultural and Scientific Cooperation, together with the political climate following the return of the Holy Crown in 1978, established a stable institutional framework for bilateral academic exchange well before the democratic transition.³⁰ Although the number of participants remained relatively modest during the 1980s, the continuity of these exchanges distinguished Hungary from several neighboring socialist countries where academic mobility was more heavily restricted or periodically interrupted.³¹

Quantitative evidence further confirms the long-term significance of these exchanges. A questionnaire survey conducted among Hungarian Fulbright alumni found that 100 percent of respondents in the social sciences reported that their Fulbright experience had significantly influenced their professional careers, while 86.4 percent of respondents in the natural sciences reported similarly positive long-term effects.³² Respondents most frequently identified the acquisition of advanced research methodologies, the expansion of international professional networks, enhanced intercultural competence, and improved academic communication skills as the most enduring outcomes of their participation. These findings indicate that the impact of the Fulbright Program extended well beyond the scholarship period, contributing to sustained professional development and long-term international academic engagement.³³

The qualitative findings reinforce these statistical results. Semi-structured elite interviews conducted with former Hungarian Fulbright scholars, including university professors, diplomats, physicians, and senior researchers, demonstrate that the scholarship experience generated institutional effects extending far beyond individual career development.³⁴ Interviewees consistently reported introducing new university courses, innovative teaching methods, international research collaborations, and institutional partnerships after returning to Hungary. Several participants also emphasized that the Fulbright Program provided access not only to scientific knowledge but also to different academic cultures, professional norms, and models of university governance that subsequently influenced institutional development in Hungary. Together, the quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that the Hungarian Fulbright Program functioned as a long-term mechanism of knowledge transfer, institutional

²⁹N. J. Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Foundations for Global Engagement in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 215–217.

³⁰Agreement between the Government of the Hungarian People's Republic and the Government of the United States of America on Cultural and Scientific Cooperation (Budapest, 1977); Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár (MNL), XIX-J-1-j, *Hungarian–American Cultural and Scientific Relations, 1977–1978*.

³¹Author's archival research in the Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár, the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (College Park, MD), and the Archives of the Hungarian–American Fulbright Commission, 2018–2025.

³²Csilla Kővári, “The Fulbright Impact Study in the Academic Fields of Arts, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences in Hungary between 1984 and 2011,” *AMERICANA E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary* 18, no. 1 (2022); author's questionnaire survey among Hungarian Fulbright alumni, conducted between 1 and 22 June 2019.

³³Kővári, “The Fulbright Impact Study.”

³⁴Semi-structured elite interviews conducted by the author with Géza Jeszenszky (2025), Donald E. Morse (2024), Tibor Frank (2017), Zoltán Abádi Nagy (2026), Katalin Nagy (2026), and additional Hungarian Fulbright alumni.

modernization, and international academic integration rather than merely as a program of educational exchange.

After 1989, Hungary became one of the earliest post-communist states to institutionalize and expand Fulbright cooperation within a democratic and internationally oriented higher education system. The establishment and consolidation of the Hungarian-American Fulbright Commission reflected both domestic modernization priorities and broader U.S. cultural diplomacy objectives in the region.³⁵ Similar to the Polish and Czech cases, Fulbright exchanges contributed to the internationalization of universities, the expansion of English-language scholarship, and the strengthening of transatlantic academic networks.³⁶ At the same time, the Hungarian experience also demonstrates the importance of individual intellectual mediators and returnee scholars in shaping institutional reform and cultural transfer processes.

The evidence presented in this study suggests that Fulbright's impact in Hungary can be interpreted at three interconnected analytical levels. At the micro-level, survey respondents and interview participants consistently described international mobility as transformative for professional identity, intercultural competence, and international orientation.³⁷ At the meso-level, returning scholars contributed to curriculum reform, the introduction of innovative teaching methods, the establishment of international research collaborations, and the internationalization of Hungarian higher education institutions.³⁸ At the macro-level, archival documents, survey findings, and interview evidence indicate that these individual and institutional initiatives contributed to Hungary's broader integration into Euro-Atlantic academic structures by strengthening long-term networks of trust, professional cooperation, and cultural diplomacy.³⁹

Rather than operating independently, these three analytical dimensions proved to be mutually reinforcing. Individual mobility generated institutional innovation, institutional cooperation fostered durable transnational partnerships, and these processes collectively strengthened Hungary's international academic presence. The Hungarian case therefore suggests that the long-term effectiveness of educational exchange as an instrument of cultural diplomacy and soft power depends less on the numerical size of a program than on its capacity to generate sustainable institutional cooperation, knowledge transfer, and enduring transnational academic communities.⁴⁰

The Hungarian case occupies a distinctive position within the broader Central and Eastern European Fulbright landscape, combining elements of both continuity and transformation. Like Poland and Romania, Hungary maintained limited but symbolically important academic exchanges with the United States from the late 1970s onward. However, compared to several neighboring countries, Hungary's relatively reform-oriented political environment and gradual economic liberalization created more favorable conditions for sustained intellectual engagement with Western academic institutions.⁴¹ As a result, the Fulbright Program in Hungary developed not only as a mechanism of educational mobility but also as part of a broader process of controlled opening toward the West during the final decades of the Cold War.

³⁵Hungarian-American Fulbright Commission, *Annual Reports*, 1992–2023; Hungarian-American Fulbright Commission, internal statistical database.

³⁶Philip G. Altbach and Jane Knight, "The Internationalization of Higher Education: Motivations and Realities," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 11, nos. 3–4 (2007): 290–305; Hans de Wit, *Internationalisation of Higher Education in Europe and Its Assessment* (Amsterdam: EAIE, 2010).

³⁷Author's questionnaire survey (2019); author's elite interviews (2017–2026).

³⁸Author's elite interviews (2017–2026).

³⁹Author's archival research; Hungarian-American Fulbright Commission, *Annual Reports*, 1992–2023; author's elite interviews.

⁴⁰Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 107–111; Nicholas J. Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Foundations for Global Engagement in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 245–262.

⁴¹Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 201–205.

From a comparative perspective, Hungary represents neither a purely elite-driven model, as in Germany, nor a predominantly grassroots-oriented one, as in Bulgaria. Instead, the Hungarian case illustrates a hybrid pattern in which educational exchange facilitated both institutional modernization and the formation of transnational intellectual networks during a period of major political and social transformation. This hybrid character is particularly significant for understanding the relationship between educational mobility and soft power. The Hungarian experience demonstrates that the influence generated by exchange programs is rarely direct or immediately measurable; rather, it emerges cumulatively through interpersonal relationships, institutional adaptation, and the gradual circulation of knowledge, values, and professional practices over time.⁴²

Consequently, Hungary provides an especially valuable case for examining how cultural diplomacy functions in semi-peripheral and transitional contexts. The Hungarian Fulbright experience shows that educational exchange programs can simultaneously serve academic, diplomatic, and strategic purposes, linking the internationalization of higher education to broader processes of transatlantic integration and the diffusion of soft power.

Conclusion

Taken together, the five cases Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Bulgaria, and Germany demonstrate that the Fulbright Program operates through distinct but complementary pathways of soft power diffusion, shaped by historical timing, institutional capacity, and program design. Poland represents the clearest case of critical mass formation, where long-term participation since 1959 has produced dense alumni networks capable of influencing institutional and policy environments at scale. The Czech Republic, by contrast, illustrates a model of professionalized program delivery, in which structured administration and the prominence of English Teaching Assistantships facilitate the standardized diffusion of pedagogical practices across both elite and regional institutions. Romania highlights a trajectory of continuity under constraint, where even limited Cold War exchanges preserved intellectual linkages that later enabled rapid post-1989 expansion and integration into transatlantic academic networks. Bulgaria, as a smaller system, exemplifies peripheral capacity-building, in which a concentrated focus on ETA programming and cultural initiatives generates a disproportionately visible impact at the regional and societal levels despite lower overall volume. Finally, Germany represents a case of institutional depth and elite network consolidation, characterized by early establishment, extensive funding, and integration into national research structures, resulting in diffuse but deeply embedded transatlantic linkages.

Although participation remained limited in the socialist period, the program nevertheless created important channels of intellectual contact and cultural mediation between Hungarian and American academia. Following the democratic transition of 1989–1990, Fulbright Hungary expanded significantly in both scope and institutional autonomy, becoming one of the most visible instruments of Hungarian-American educational cooperation.⁴³

From a soft power perspective, Hungary represents a hybrid model that combines elite academic networking with broader pedagogical and cultural influence. Hungarian Fulbright alumni have occupied important positions in higher education, research institutions, cultural diplomacy, and public administration, thereby contributing to the long-term circulation of American academic norms and professional practices. At the same time, American scholars and instructors in Hungary have played a significant role in promoting English-language education, intercultural dialogue, and the internationalization of Hungarian universities. Unlike the German case, where Fulbright became deeply embedded within already highly developed institutional structures, the Hungarian example demonstrates how educational

⁴²Nicholas J. Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Foundations for Global Engagement in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 12–18.

⁴³H. Tóth, “The History and Development of the Fulbright Program in Hungary,” *Hungarian Educational Research Journal* 8, no. 2 (2018): 45–59.

exchange programs can contribute directly to post-socialist institutional modernization and international reintegration. Moreover, the Hungarian experience highlights the symbolic dimension of soft power. Participation in Fulbright exchanges has frequently been associated with professional prestige, international credibility, and access to global academic networks. In this respect, the program has functioned not merely as a scholarship scheme but also as a mechanism of symbolic capital formation, reinforcing the attractiveness of American higher education and research culture among Hungarian intellectual and professional elites.⁴⁴ Simultaneously, Hungarian participants returning from the United States often serve as mediators, adapting and reinterpreting American educational models within local institutional realities rather than simply reproducing them. This process demonstrates that soft power operates through negotiation and localization as much as through direct influence.

When compared, the six national cases reveal that the Fulbright Program's long-term effectiveness stems from its adaptability to varying historical and institutional environments. In larger, economically stronger systems such as Germany, the impact manifests primarily through network consolidation and institutional embeddedness. In post-socialist Central and Eastern European contexts such as Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic, however, Fulbright has often functioned simultaneously as an instrument of democratization, educational modernization, and Western integration.⁴⁵ Despite substantial differences in scale, funding, and political context, all six cases demonstrate that sustained interpersonal exchange creates durable forms of trust, professional connectivity, and cultural legitimacy that extend beyond formal diplomatic relations.

Across these cases, the Fulbright Program emerges not as a uniform policy instrument but as a flexible architecture of influence, operating simultaneously through elite networks, institutional partnerships, pedagogical transfer, and grassroots engagement. These layered mechanisms align closely with the logic of soft power, whereby attraction, credibility, and sustained interpersonal exchange generate long-term international alignment. The comparative evidence thus suggests that the effectiveness of educational diplomacy depends less on scale alone than on the interaction between program design and national context, with different configurations producing distinct but equally durable forms of transatlantic integration. At a broader analytical level, the findings also indicate that educational exchange programs remain among the most resilient and adaptable instruments of public diplomacy in the twenty-first century, particularly during periods of geopolitical uncertainty, democratic transformation, and renewed competition for international influence.⁴⁶

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⁴⁴J. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 55–72.

⁴⁵Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–258.

⁴⁶Giles Scott-Smith, *Networks of Empire: The US State Department's Foreign Leader Program in the Netherlands, France, and Britain 1950–70* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2008), 18–24.

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Balázs NÉMETH

Short Insight into Conferences on University Lifelong Learning

The European Perspective

56th Eucen Conference on University Lifelong Learning at the University of Cagliari (IT), 3-5 June 2026. – Empowering Futures: Lifelong Learning, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in a Changing World

In a rapidly evolving world, LLL is at the heart of universities' missions to foster inclusive, adaptable, and forward-looking societies, as a fundamental pillar of social progress, equity, and equality. With the participation of 114 conference delegates from universities across Europe, the 56th Eucen conference, hosted by the University of Cagliari (IT), provided an opportunity to explore how university lifelong learning has been shaping not only individual trajectories, but the very fabric of our societies, economies and futures.

The conference focused on dismantling barriers to education and fostering inclusive environments where all individuals – regardless of gender, background, socio-economic status or other situations- can thrive. By fostering collaboration and sharing innovative models, this conference acted as a catalyst for meaningful change, inspiring new initiatives and policies that make LLL an engine for diversity, equity and inclusion in society.

Participants of the conference have explored three different strands to better understand and relate to the roles of universities in promoting both social and economic aspects of lifelong learning with sensitive attention to sustainability, solidarity and synergies:

- **Strand 1. – Shaping Society:** *Universities as catalysts for inclusive social transformation.* The focus will be on LLL as a tool for social equity and mobility; addressing systemic barriers through accessible education; community partnerships and widening participation; EDI and gender equality in LLL policy and practice; and the university's role in fostering civic engagement and democratic resilience.
- **Strand 2. – Shaping Skills:** *Equipping diverse learners for a changing world of work.* Just and inclusive digital economy; Embedding inclusive pedagogy in up-reskilling programs; Gender pathways in STEM and leadership roles; LLL frameworks to serve underrepresented groups; Unconscious bias and barriers in professional development.
- **Strand 3. – Shaping Tomorrow:** *Designing Futures – Policy, innovation and Equity in LLL.* Future-facing strategies for inclusion; Gener-responsive digital and AI-based learning environments; Innovative models for integration and cross-cultural learning; LLL as a driver for UN SDGs; EDI-informed curriculum co-design and learner voice integration.

Inclusion, it must be recognized that the focus on community partnership has led EUCEN to contribute to the learning city–learning ecosystem discourse by establishing its thematic platform and organizing webinars to promote learning community development through stakeholder collaboration, in accordance with the principles of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities.

Source: [56th eucen Annual Conference – CAGLIARI - EUCEN](#) and [unica.it - 56th EUCEN Annual Conference](#)

The Hungarian Perspective

22nd MELLearn Conference in University Lifelong Learning

MELLearn – Higher Education Network for Lifelong Learning Association organized the 22nd National and International Lifelong Learning Conference for June 5, 2026 with the National University of Public Service. The main themes of this event was:

- The role of lifelong learning in higher education in the implementation of quality and efficient learning during the era of AI (*Venue: National University of Public Service – Ludovika Campus*)

This conference, which took place with more than 130 registered participants, reflected upon the trends that determine the processes of efficient and effective learning in higher education environment during digital and technological transformation and sustainability challenges. At the event, researchers and experts representing the research and practice aspects of MELLearn member institutions and the host National University of Public Service, as well as domestic and international professional partners, highlighted the individual, social, and community benefits of continuous learning through innovations and practice-oriented examples.

The plenary session began with welcoming remarks: First, the elected MELLearn President, László Szegedi, Vice-rector for Education at the National University of Public Service, welcomed the conference participants, then András Döbör, outgoing MELLearn President and Board Member from the University of Szeged, addressed the conference.

On behalf of Eucen (European Universities Lifelong Learning Network), Executive Director Carme Royo welcomed the event via online video.

In the first block of plenary presentations, Éva Bíró from the National University of Public Service presented the training and continuing professional development programs at the National University of Public Service, as well as methodological innovations within them. András Benedek from Budapest University of Technology and Economics analyzed the connections and challenges of higher education and adult learning by highlighting domestic and international trends and issues.

This was followed by an intensive plenary Round Table Discussion on the effects of digital learning technologies on the higher education environment, involving research and development experts, entitled The Application and Regulation of Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education.

The roundtable participants were:

- László Horváth – associate professor from ELTE Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology and its Institute of Educational Sciences
- György Molnár – professor of Óbuda University and its Kálmán Kandó Faculty of Electrical Engineering
- Zoltán Vörös – associate professor from the University of Pécs and its Digital Education and Learning Support Center
- Enikő Szőke-Milinte – associate professor from Esterházy Károly Catholic University and its Institute of Educational Sciences
- Moderator: Dóra Egervári – senior lecturer from the University of Pécs and its Institute for Human Development at the Faculty of Humanities

In the second plenary block, George Koulaouzidis, a professor at the Hellenic Open University, discussed the role of AI in influencing both adult learners and their personalities in his lecture entitled Who has Voice in Adult and Lifelong Learning? The Educational Encounter in the Age of AI. Then, Pieter Sprangers, professor at the University of Antwerp gave a lecture entitled Ode to stunning learning for all in relation to effective educational planning and design.

The afternoon workshop was held in ten sessions with a total of 96 presentations on the following topics:

- Learner Engagement, Motivation, and Educational Experiences
- Education in the Age of AI – Quality, Responsibility, Efficiency in Public Education Institutions
- Integrating AI into University Teaching and Student Activities. Regulation, Evaluation
- Organizational Learning in the University Environment – New Paths for Higher Education Research
- The Role of Libraries and Information Professionals in Supporting Higher Education LLL in the Age of AI
- Challenges of Inclusive Learning Spaces and Learning Communities in the Age of Digital Transformation
- Developing Workplace and Work-Based Learning in Higher Education Partnerships
- Renewed Skills and Competence Development in Higher Education LLL Environments
- The Transformation of the Adult Education Profession in the Age of AI: Theory or Reality? EPALE Workshop
- Higher Education LLL Challenges: Developing and Providing Flexible Learning Pathways
- Doctoral Section
- Educational Development and Digital Culture Change in Higher Education – Methodological Responses in the Age of AI

Finally, at the end of the day, the closing plenary session was formulated by Professor László Christián, vice-rector from the National University of Public Service, to report as a Fulbright scholar on the changes in the American higher education environment as a Visiting Professor in the United States. Finally, participants were informed that the venue of the 2027 MELLearn Higher Education LLL Conference would be the Eötvös Lóránd University and its Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology.

Organizers thank cooperating partners, namely the Hungarian Rectors' Conference (MRK), Tempus Public Foundation (TKA), EUCEN, ASEM LLL HUB and the European LLL Platform, for their collaborative partnership, and especially thank EPALE Hungary as a key partner for its help and supportive contribution!

More details can be found at: [Konferencia program 2026 – Mellearn Egyesület](#)

Zita SCHUBERT

Vilmos Vass: The Soul of Pedagogy – Stories from the World of Teaching

The Human Dimensions of the Teaching Profession



One of the constant challenges in the field of pedagogical literature is how to link the theoretical findings of educational science with the day-to-day experiences of teachers. A considerable amount of publications on education lean either toward theoretical approaches or practical methodologies, while we more rarely encounter works that focus on the human, personal, and professional dimensions of pedagogical activity.

In this regard, Vilmos Vass's *The Soul of Pedagogy* is a unique endeavour: a reflective work on pedagogy that approaches the essence of pedagogy through the lens of human relationships, professional self-awareness and a commitment to teaching. One of the most valuable aspects of the book is that it interprets pedagogy not merely as a professional task or institutional practice but as a vocation centered on the individual. The author consistently argues that the effectiveness of teaching is not merely a matter of subject knowledge or methodological preparedness, but is closely linked to the character, authenticity, and interpersonal skills of the educator. This perspective runs through the entire volume and promotes a set of values that form one of the most important foundations of contemporary pedagogical thought.

This work is particularly remarkable for not portraying pedagogical knowledge solely as a theoretical construct. Vilmos Vass considers professional experience, real-life situations and the reflections associated with them as legitimate sources of insight into pedagogy. The book's narrative structure allows the reader not only to encounter theoretical statements but also to gain a glimpse into the thought processes that shape a teacher's identity. This approach is particularly valuable from the perspective of professional development as it draws attention to narrative and reflective thinking.

One of the book's most noteworthy strengths is its emphasis on self-reflection. The author does not offer ready-made answers to the complex questions of pedagogy, but rather opens up a space for reflection in which the reader can reinterpret their own professional experiences. Teaching is presented here not as a body of fixed knowledge, but as a continuous process of learning and development. This approach aligns with the modern concept of being a reflective teacher, according to which one of

the most important elements of professional competence is the ability to critically analyze one's own practices.

Another significant contribution of this volume is its emphasis on the prominent role of pedagogical and human values. Vilmos Vass persuasively points out that pedagogy is founded on trust, acceptance, and mutual respect. The teacher–student relationship is not merely a framework for the transfer of knowledge, but is in itself a factor in shaping one's personality. The author's line of reasoning is particularly timely in a 21st-century educational environment, where, alongside technological advancement and digitization, the preservation and development of human relationships are becoming an increasingly important issue. This volume serves as a reminder that the essential elements of pedagogy are still rooted in human encounters. The book's language reflects scholarly sophistication, while at the same time remains accessible and direct.

The author's distinctive style also deserves special mention. Vilmos Vass's writing style is characterized by subtle, low-key humor, self-reflective cheerfulness, and a direct tone, which naturally weaves its way through the academic line of reasoning. This humor is not self-serving; rather, it illuminates the human side of pedagogical situations, eases the tension of scholarly discourse, and helps to ensure that the reader not only interprets but also experiences the presented experiences. The author is able to discuss even complex pedagogical issues in a clear and accessible manner.

As a result, this volume is aimed simultaneously at active teachers, students enrolled in teacher training programs, and a broader professional audience interested in pedagogy. The text's professional credibility is further strengthened by the decades of experience that have shaped the author's ideas. The book's role in conveying values deserves special mention. It not only addresses the day-to-day issues of teaching but also commits to fundamental human and professional values such as responsibility, openness, curiosity, cooperation, and leading by personal example. These values are not presented in a declarative manner, but rather emerge naturally from the author's train of thought and stories. The significance of this volume also lies in the fact that it brings the human dimensions – which are often overlooked in pedagogical discourse – into the spotlight. While today's educational systems are in many cases dominated by the concepts of measurability, effectiveness, and performance, Vilmos Vass's work reminds us that the essence of pedagogy cannot be captured solely through objective indicators. The true value of pedagogical work is often best seen in the long-term effects that unfold as a result of an inspiring teacher-student relationship.

In summary, it can be said that *The Soul of Pedagogy* is an important volume that fills a gap in contemporary pedagogical narratives. The book is not merely a compilation of professional experiences, but also an authentic and uncompromising statement in support of the teaching profession. Its greatest value lies in placing the individual back at the center of pedagogy and highlighting that the true power of pedagogy is in personal relationships, professional integrity, and human awareness. Vilmos Vass's work is a read that not only encourages further thinking but also reinforces the reader's conviction that, despite all changing circumstances, pedagogy remains fundamentally a people-centered vocation. For this very reason, the book is a valuable read for all those who view the teaching profession not merely as a job, but as an activity that shapes character and builds community.

Anna FAZEKAS

Youth Beyond Generations

Inequalities, Post-Adolescence, and Hybrid Transition to Adulthood



Review of the Volume: *A maszkon túl – Generációs koronavírus- és válságmegélések vizsgálata több kutatási módszer együttes alkalmazásával* by Balázs Böcskei, Mariann Fekete, Ádám Nagy & Andrea Szabó

Balázs Böcskei and his co-authors aimed to examine the validity of the generational approach in light of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected age-cohort self-definition. As the authors themselves point out, describing societies through the lens of generations is experiencing a renaissance, not only within academia but also in public discourse. This makes both the volume and the research program it is based on particularly significant and timely. At the heart of the study lies the attempt to grasp the concept of a generational "community of experience" through the prism of contemporary crises. The researchers investigated whether COVID-19 created a force field – a shared interpretative context – capable of generating generational organization, and whether young people could detect it and integrate it into their self-identification.

The authors draw upon the approaches of Karl Mannheim (2000 [1928]) as well as Neil Howe and William Strauss (1991). In Mannheim's view, generation formation centers around shared experience, mutual orientation, collective action, and a common frame of interpretation. Howe and Strauss capture the impact of historical processes through collective traits; in their theory, generational division is shaped by *how* these processes are experienced and processed. Thus, their work also reveals a form of shared interpretation, shaped more by lived, experienced processes and changes than by individual life situations, the opportunities (or limitations) of the socio-cultural environment, or even the specific features of macro-social and nation-state structures.

The youth-sociological focus of the research program creates the foundation for an important dialogue within the academic field (Bessant et al., 2024). The discursive presence of researchers and a vibrant academic dialogue also provide ammunition for public debate and for analyzing political actors' strategies (Wyn, 2010, 2011). The concept of youth is a site of power struggles, in which actors of

the political subsystem possess significant meaning-making power. Uncovering the influence of youth-sociological discourse on youth policy remains a perpetually relevant task, where critical analysis of political practices that reflect inequalities, social differences, and disadvantages can gain traction. In academic discourse, the obsolescence of a universal interpretation of transitioning into adulthood is becoming increasingly emphasized, and the blurring of age-based categories as rigid boundaries is a growing trend (Wyn, 2010, 2011; Bessant et al., 2024). This is because thinking that assumes universality oversimplifies social changes, the lived experience of individual life stages, and the diversity of transitions (Fazekas, 2026).

One of the central pillars of the research is examining young people's identification, specifically how lived socio-cultural influences are reflected in youth identity. In this regard, the results validate a generation-based division (primarily built on technological and cultural differences) from the perspective of the age cohort involved: the effects of digitalization and the altered modes of connection brought on by the pandemic (home office, the fading of offline relationships, etc.) can both be detected in the process of self-definition. At the same time, this does not come with an interiorization of generational consciousness: it cannot be stated that "the COVID generation" serves as a valid description of the target group through youth self-definition.

The essence of generation theory is that those affected share a common experience and a shared perception; the resulting similar interpretation of their situation creates connection among individuals. The authors' findings call this interpretive framework and common denominator into question. They argue that, rather than a generational identity, differences and variations reflecting cultural capital, knowledge capital, and media influence are far more evident among young people. Analyses conducted on large-sample youth surveys in Hungary also support the importance of digitalization, as well as generational attributes and habits defined by media consumption (Nagy-Fazekas, 2016; Székely, 2014). From this perspective, the consumption habits of Generation X and the younger generations (Y, Z) are clearly distinguishable; among youth, there is an evident, continuous increase in free time spent at home and in the online space, along with a shift in attitudes toward digital devices (see, for example: digital natives versus digital immigrants). However, describing society purely through the lens of the information society and media consumption falls into the trap of homogenization. It fails to account for inequalities in access, device-usage competencies, application, interpretation, and conscious consumption; it overlooks an individual's exposure shaped by social status and cultural capital ownership, as well as the significance of differing socialization pathways (Fazekas, 2024, 2026; Nagy, 2013). Yet, at the intersection of awareness and accessibility, a key and unavoidable conclusion emerges: the quality of digital literacy and device usage depends heavily on social status, and inequalities can be reproduced in this domain as well (Nagy-Fazekas, 2016; Koltói-Varga, 2022).

The authors capture one of the main critiques of generational discourse precisely by raising the issue of this homogenizing framing. They argue that whether generational consciousness or social status consciousness carries greater weight and is more measurable is a crucial research question. Sharing this view, a generation-based interpretation of society is indeed open to criticism and can only be adapted with limitations. Numerous studies highlight the structural power of status perception and socio-economic position (Csizmadia, 2022; Fazekas, 2014, 2023, 2026). In this respect, findings reveal – among other things – that fault lines (graspable along leisure consumption, migration potential, attitudes toward the family as an institution, and many other factors) are clearly measurable. These carry a structuring force, and the status groups they outline are readily observable within youth society. Because of opportunities arising from existential differences, the characteristics of subjective status, and effects measured through post-adolescent transitions, what appears to be a uniform generation is in fact intersected by well-defined social differences (Fazekas, 2023, 2026). Correlations derived from large-sample national youth survey data suggest that subjective financial situation and status perception significantly impact young people's attitudes toward future plans and their current scope of

action. For instance, the impact of status perception is clearly measurable regarding future decisions and family planning (Fazekas, 2023: 14):

„Fear of further status decline drives young people toward labor market mobility, just as their attitude toward acquiring material goods reflects anxiety, with less trust in their ability to improve status. Among anxious youth [those who fear further status decline in the future], moving out from parents is least likely, as they lack the opportunity due to existential exposure. Status perception plays a decisive role in both marriage and childbearing: a lack of existential security leads to delaying marriage and to scaled-back plans regarding childbearing.”

Throughout the volume, the authors repeatedly refer to determinisms linked to the macro-social and macro-economic context. Along these lines, they primarily highlight differences between political-economic units and nation-states (e.g., regarding the interpretation of the 1968 events). Meanwhile, little is said about the fact that within national borders, countless influences, impacts, and a diversity of opportunities and limitations can also be identified. In Hungary, strong socio-cultural contrasts and fault lines are measurable (Ferge, 2002; Andorka, 2006; Éber, 2020). The reproduction of social inequalities heavily frames individual perspectives. Consider the worsening position of marginalized social groups, those slipping downward under the shadow of a dissolving middle class, or the beneficiaries of inherited privileges among the political-economic elite. On this issue, it is worth emphasizing how difficult it is for researchers to reach families with fewer opportunities, those dealing with cumulative disadvantages, and NEET youth (*Not in Education, Employment, or Training*), which consequently limits their representation (cf. Fazekas-Hamarics, 2024). Data interpretation is always cast in the shadow of data collection itself: the representativeness of the involved, reached target group.

Furthermore, the generational approach is nuanced by the fact that the government narrative in Hungary over the past decade and a half has had a significant impact on shaping generational group identity around similar interpretations of social institutions, values, and cultural functioning (Fazekas, 2023, 2026; Fazekas-Hamarics, 2024; cf. Gregor-Kováts, 2018). This includes an institutional interpretation of youth that defined structural responses to youth needs through family policy. At the same time, government framing placed little emphasis on age-specific features and the perspective of post-adolescent existential exposure. Yet, the prolonged youth phase—the delayed achievement of independence and social maturity—is a defining phenomenon in the life of youth society (Nagy-Tibori, 2016; Somlai et al., 2007). According to data from the most recent wave of large-sample national youth surveys (*Magyar Ifjúság Kutatás 2020*), 68 percent of legally adult young people aged 18–29 live with their parents and/or grandparents, while 61 percent of this age group share a household budget with their parents. Based on calculations from this database, members of the studied age group who have not yet achieved existential independence project both financial independence from parents and acquiring their own home to occur around their late twenties on average (Fazekas, 2023).

Since the 2010s, a traditional interpretation of family or gender roles has been continuously present in both legislation and political discourse, forming a norm and a reference frame for younger generations as well. Family planning burdened by economic pressure, combined with the merging of housing poverty and existential inequalities with demographic crisis management, particularly targets and affects today's post-adolescent, millennial youth. Institutional responses to youth housing vulnerability and difficulties define their scope of action: remaining trapped in rental housing, taking out high-interest market loans resulting in decades of debt, or purchasing a home tied to childbearing commitments (whether planned or forced). This divides youth society, creating fault lines even within generations (Fazekas, 2023, 2024, 2026; Fazekas-Hamarics, 2024). The „CSOK effect” („family housing allowance”) shapes both the present and the future: in a few years, its effects are expected to become measurable in how social institutions and support systems respond to the specific challenges emerging in the lives of affected families (e.g., daycare/kindergarten placement, education, divorce, managing risks associated with infertility).

Both the volume's findings and the aspects analyzed above lead to the conclusion that in relevant research and discourse, rather than relying on traditional interpretations of generations, it would be far more constructive to examine the operation of parallel effects. In the lives of Hungarian youth, socio-economic-political processes carry as much weight as opportunities within their individual micro-environments, global influences, and the knowledge capital and cultural context available to interpret them (Fazekas, 2024; Fekete-Nagy, 2020). When it comes to youth age groups, we can speak of intersecting parallel experiences and identities rather than homogeneous, pure, generationally defined macro-groups. In this regard, youth society is best understood at the intersection of key contemporary global processes, the current political context, the opportunities provided by the micro-environment, and peer influence. As the authors' research findings highlight, while the interiorization of global impacts is measurable, it does not form part of the group's self-identification. Much like Hungarian society as a whole, the determinism created by economic status—along with the scope of action and potential attached to it—frames the formation of youth groupings beyond generations.

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