

THE ROLE AND POTENTIAL OF HUNGARIAN UNIVERSITIES TO SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF LIFELONG LEARNING

Éva FARKAS

University of Szeged, HU

Email: farkaseva9@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study presents the performance of Hungarian universities in the three main areas where universities can best achieve transformative impact on boosting lifelong learning. These areas comprise educational services for traditional and non-traditional students, the professionalisation of teachers and educators working in higher education and adult education and the provision of flexible learning pathways, with recognition of prior learning and offering micro-credentials.

INTRODUCTION

The implications of the global megatrends we face every day – including, but not limited to, industry 4.0, digitalisation, an ageing society, climate crisis, migration, COVID, war, and limitation of human rights – are fundamentally changing our lives, work and relationships. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it particularly clear and painful to learn that in our ever-changing world, individuals and organizations that adapt quickly and flexibly to accelerated change and development can continue to succeed. Learning is key to adapting effectively to challenges, and true lifelong learning will gain more genuine importance than ever before. It is also widely acknowledged that lifelong learning is fundamental to achieving the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015) and to implementing and enforcing the principles and rights contained in the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2021).

Universities at the crossroads of education, research, and innovation are in a unique position to become the drivers for the revitalization of lifelong learning at the individual, organisational and (inter)national levels to support the social, economic and environmental transformations needed to address the world's most pressing problems, in line with the 2030 Agenda (European Commission, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). Experience shows that the following are considered key areas in which universities can have the best transformative impact on boosting lifelong learning: 1) educational services for traditional and non-traditional students, 2) the professionalisation of teachers and educators working in higher education and adult education and 3) the provision of flexible learning pathways, with recognition of prior learning and offering micro-credentials.

HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT IN HUNGARY

In the academic year 2022/23, there are 64 higher education institutions recognised by the state in Hungary: 39 are universities (including universities of applied sciences) and 25 colleges (Educational Authority, 2022). Most universities (21) are run by private foundations governed by their boards of trustees. In 2018, the Ministry for Innovation and Technology adopted a plan to change the model of maintaining and funding universities. The main goal of the model change was to improve the overall performance and competitiveness of universities and to attract new private resources through a more flexible regulatory environment. As a result of the reform process, 21 universities were transformed from state-funded universities into private foundations by September 2021. There are currently only five public universities in Hungary, and the rest are funded by private foundations or religious organisations.

Pursuant to the Higher Education Act, the core activities of higher education institutions include education, academic research and artistic creation. The educational core activity of higher education institutions extends to include higher education vocational training programmes (4 semesters, EQF level 5), Bachelor programmes (BA/BSc, 6-8 semesters, EQF level 6), Master programmes (MA/MSc, 2-4 semesters, EQF level 7), doctoral programmes (EQF level 8) and postgraduate specialist training programmes (non-degree, 2-4 semesters).

The post-2010 higher education policy in Hungary had an immensely negative impact on the number of applicants and enrolments, which fell radically by 2013. The decline was triggered by the introduction of a self-sustaining higher education system and an extensive self-financing of training programmes, which was accompanied by a reduction and redistribution of state-funded places (Kováts-Temesi, 2018, p. 16). Elements of restrictive education policy decisions included:

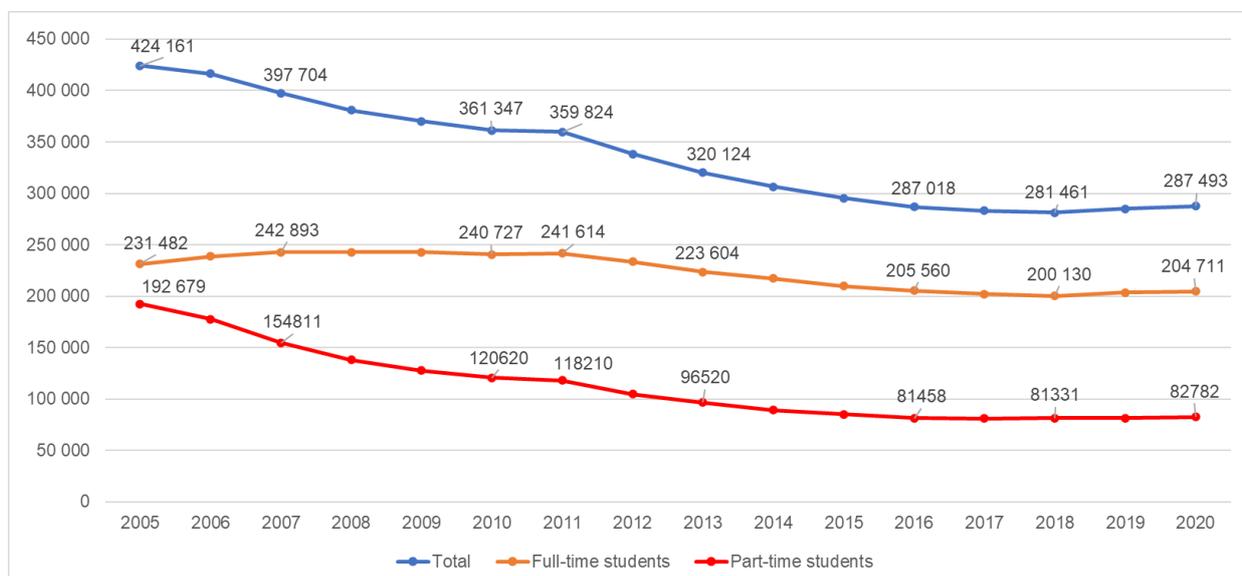
- a 20% reduction in the number of public-financed places at universities,
- abolition of specific university courses (including the Bachelor's degree in Andragogy and the Master's degree in teaching Andragogy),
- a significant increase of and government decision on the minimum points required for a successful application to university for popular undergraduate programmes of humanities and social sciences,
- change in the conditions for prioritising disadvantaged applicants (Kováts-Temesi, 2018, pp. 16-17; Farkas, 2016, pp. 34-38).

In addition, for some undergraduate programmes, the advanced level secondary school leaving exam (at least one out of the five subjects) was made a condition for entry to higher education, even for those who had passed their exam before the introduction of the two-level system¹. This requirement became mandatory for Bachelor programmes from 2020. These measures clearly negatively impacted students' perceptions and resulted in a 20% decline in applications for the academic year 2020/21. The higher education policy decisions have led to a significant drop in student numbers over the past decade. The total number of higher education students in 2020 was 73,854 fewer than in 2010, indicating a 20% drop.

¹ The two-level secondary school-leaving examination was introduced in 2005, which makes it possible for students to take the secondary school-leaving examination either at an ordinary (intermediate) or an advanced level in each of the four compulsory subjects (Hungarian language and literature, Mathematics, History, and a foreign language). Students are allowed to select the fifth subject, which can also be a vocational subject in upper secondary vocational schools. In 2022, 3% of pupils passed the secondary school leaving exam at an advanced level from Hungarian language and literature, 7% from Mathematics, 12% from History, 41% from English, and 21% from German. The ordinary and advanced level secondary school leaving certificates are classified at level 4 of the European Qualifications Framework.

The number of full-time students decreased by 36,019 (15% decrease), while the number of part-time students fell by 33% (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Number of students in higher education in Hungary



Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2022

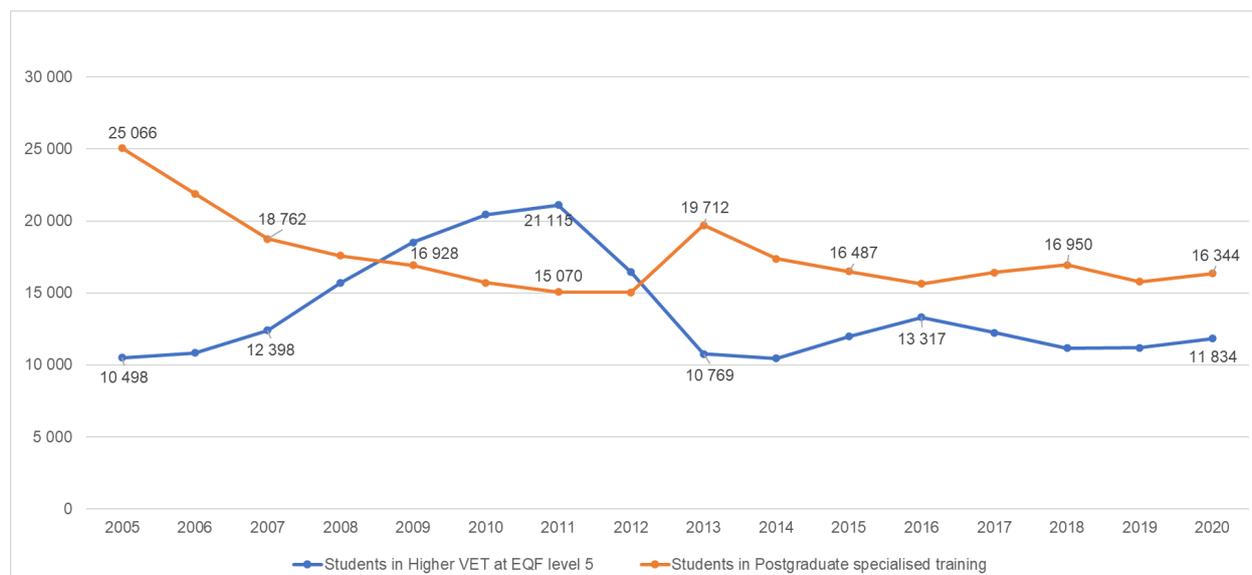
Given the above, it is hardly surprising that Hungary has one of the lowest tertiary education attainment rates in Europe among 25-34 year-olds (EUROSTAT, 2021). It was 30.7% in 2020, which is far below the EU average (40.4%), although there is a strong demand for highly skilled workers in Hungary and the employment rate of recent tertiary graduates is above the EU average² (OECD, 2021).

EDUCATION SERVICES AT UNIVERSITIES IN HUNGARY

Universities in Hungary tend to focus mainly on learning pathways to Bachelor's and Master's degrees. In addition to these, universities offer two main types of study programmes. One is a 2-year-long higher education vocational training programme, which results in vocational qualification at EQF level 5. The other is a 1- or 2-year-long postgraduate specialist training programme for graduates holding Bachelor's or Master's degrees. These programmes can only be launched by higher education institutions and do not lead to a university degree but offer the option of specialisation in a particular field of study. As data show (Figure 2), the Hungarian higher education system has not been able to strengthen short-term tertiary education, which is the main channel of expansion of higher education in many countries.

² The employment rate aged 25-64 with tertiary education in 2020 is 85.9% in Hungary, and the EU average is 85% (EUROSTAT, 2021; OECD, 2021).

Figure 2: Number of students in short-term higher education study programmes in Hungary



Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2022

Another problem is that only less than half of all students graduate within the required time, and the completion rate is one of the lowest among the OECD countries (OECD, 2021). In this context, the provision of effective learning support services for students with learning difficulties or other disadvantages and the retention of students who drop out of Bachelor and Master programmes by offering them adult education would be important areas in supporting lifelong learning at universities. However, adult and continuing education outside the academic track is not considered a strategic issue and is not recognised in the same way as traditional university study programmes. In 2020, only half of the institutions provided adult learning outside the formal university system, and only 5% of all adults participated in it (OSAP, 2020). However, it seems that exploiting the potential of educational services for non-traditional students could be an important and worthwhile area for the expansion of university lifelong learning.

PROFESSIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION TEACHERS AND ADULT EDUCATORS

One of the areas where universities can best achieve transformative impact on boosting lifelong learning is undoubtedly the professional development of adult educators and teachers in higher education. When it comes to quality and professionalism, it is of utmost importance that those who work in adult education should acquire professional qualifications in higher education. In many countries, as education becomes more and more service-oriented, adult educators and teachers are recommended or expected to have formal qualifications. In Hungary, a pedagogical or andragogical qualification or competences are not required to teach in adult or higher education. Although quality issues are increasingly discussed in the field of higher education in Hungary as well, professional excellence/recognition is still measured in terms of the quality of academic performance (e.g., research, publications, citations). At the same time, the pedagogical activity of teachers in higher education is rather undervalued, and there are no standardised qualitative criteria for assessing it.

Teachers/educators can be most effective if they become lifelong learners, engage in teaching innovations and institutional educational development and reflect on and evaluate their teaching for improvement. Adaptivity is crucial in quality lifelong learning, which implies the need for professional development and continuous learning at both the individual and community levels. It is closely linked to the concepts of adult learning, learning support and a learner-centred approach. Universities, through teacher training, could have an outstanding impact on empowering teachers and enabling them to apply modern teaching methods, create innovative and motivating learning environments, and use non-traditional forms and activities of learning and assessment to enhance self-directed learning³.

PROVISION OF FLEXIBLE LEARNING PATHWAYS

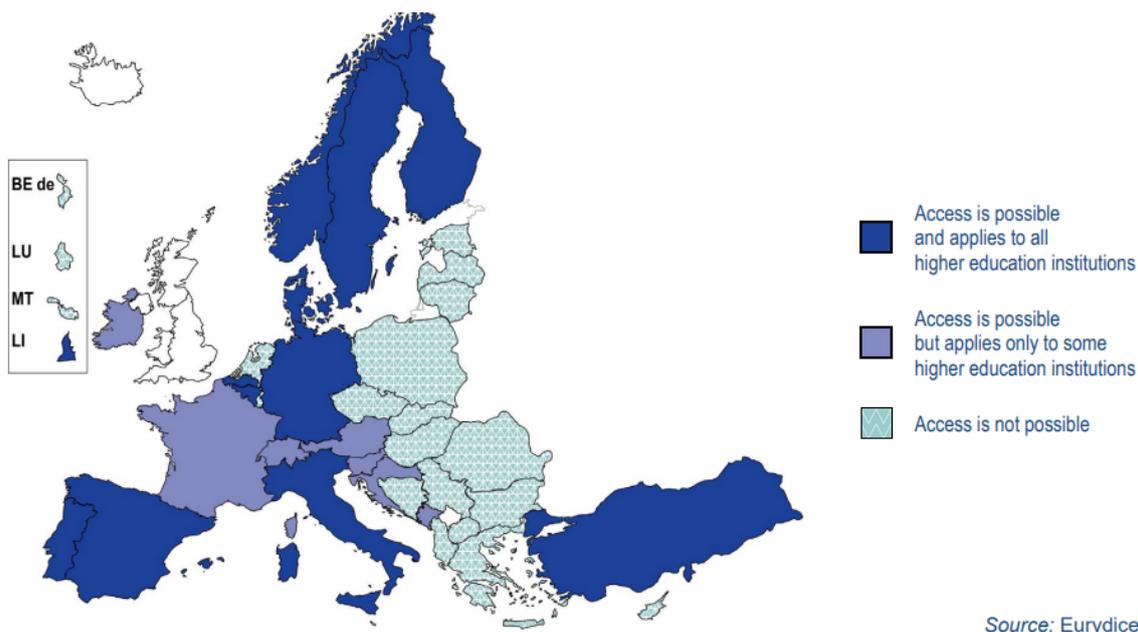
Successful policies for lifelong learning must include ensuring flexible learning pathways for individuals. In the fast-changing world of work, short-term, practice-oriented training is the best way to ensure a match and harmony between individual skills and labour market needs. Offering micro-credentials (included in the twelve flagship actions announced in the European Skills Agenda) (European Commission, 2020) makes it possible to certify short-term learning outcomes relevant to the labour market. This action can be an effective way of flexible and tailor-made professional development. The Council recommends the European approach to micro-credentials in order to reach their full potential based on common standards ensuring quality, transparency, cross-border comparability, recognition, and portability (Council of the European Union, 2022). Micro-credentials are not yet in established practice in Hungary, and the professional dialogue on this issue is still in its early stages.

Another tool closely linked to micro-credentials for ensuring flexible upskilling and reskilling learning pathways and access to formal education and at least partial qualification is validation and recognition of learning outcomes acquired in a wide range of non-formal and informal learning environments. Validation could also provide opportunities to create a more sustainable future for refugees and migrants, who often do not have a certificate of their formally acquired qualifications.

Unlike Western Europe, in most Central, Eastern, and Southeast European countries, including Hungary, it is impossible to gain access to higher education without completing formal upper secondary education (Figure 3).

³ The best-known and widely accepted definition of self-directed learning comes from Knowles: "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (Knowles, 1975, p. 18).

Figure 3: Accessing higher education with non-formal and/or informal learning, 2020/21

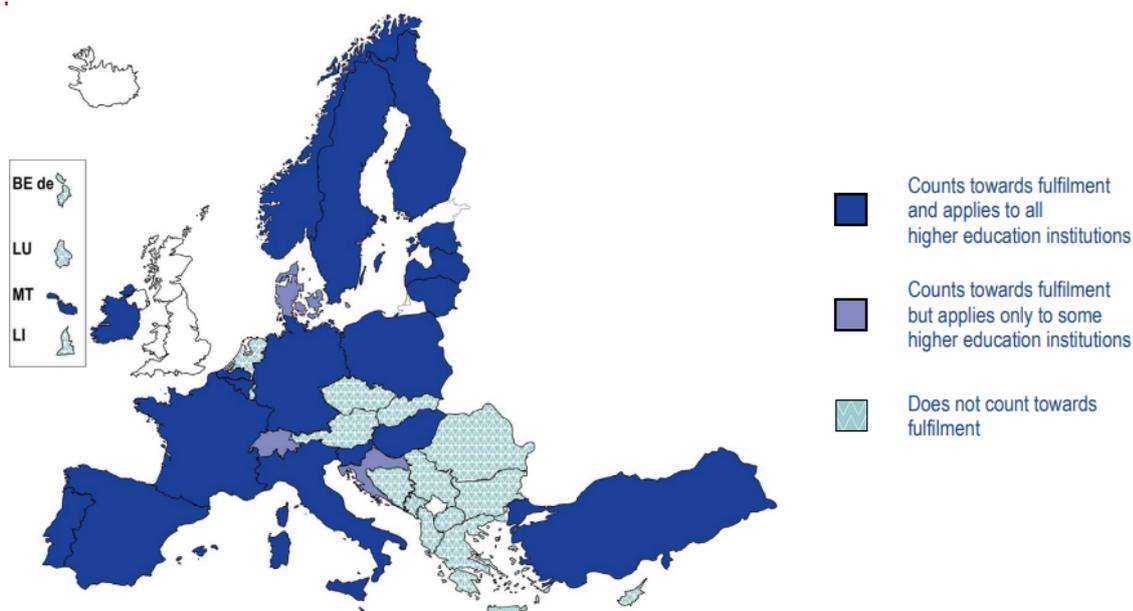


Source: Eurydice.

Source: European Commission, European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2022, p. 32

However, in most countries (including Hungary), it is possible to count prior non-formal and/or informal learning towards fulfilling the first cycle of a higher education study programme (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Prior non-formal and/or informal learning counting towards the fulfilment of a higher education study programme in the academic year 2020/21



Source: Eurydice.

Source: European Commission, European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2022. p. 33

The Higher Education Act in Hungary states that the Credit Transfer Committee is entitled to recognise prior non-formal and informal learning to fulfil academic requirements. However, it seems that only a few universities have a regulated framework for the validation process. To understand how validation works in practice, we conducted a questionnaire survey among university teachers in 2019/2020. From all 39 state-recognised universities, 1281 teachers (10% of all university teachers) were involved in the research. Twenty-eight per cent of the teachers said that validation exists at their universities, and processes and procedures are regulated in the study and examination requirements. Twenty-seven per cent of the respondents reported that validation works on an individual agreement between teachers and students. These data indicate that validation exists at universities, but in an informal way. Validation should be a quality-assured and regulated process through standardised procedures. Validation methods are typically the same as the assessment methods and tools used in formal learning. However, validation requires the use of several combined methods to consider individual differences, the nature of the learning outcomes to be assessed, and the fact that learning outcomes acquired in non-formal contexts are undifferentiated, fragmented, and unstructured. Twenty-six per cent of teachers said that validation and recognition of non-formal prior learning do not exist at all at the given university (Kovács, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

Lifelong learning and the role of universities in making it a reality are still not sufficiently reflected in Hungarian education policy. There is no comprehensive and strong lifelong learning policy framework in Hungary, and the concept of lifelong learning has a narrower interpretation than the basic idea that emphasises the value of all forms of learning in improving the quality of life. An analysis of the institutional development plans of universities suggests that lifelong learning as a factor influencing strategic approach has not yet become an integral part of the universities' organisational culture and an organising principle of their mission. This is not unique to Hungary, however. As the latest global survey⁴ by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning concludes, although the higher education sector has a huge potential to promote lifelong learning, universities today are far from realising their potential to stimulate social change and social enlightenment (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022). Recent European initiatives and developments do, however, provide universities with effective support to implement SDGs in their strategic plan and create lifelong learning governing principles and organizational culture, which permeates their way of thinking and drives all their activities to start changes in the right direction (UNESCO, 2022).

Universities are responsible for opening a window to the world and offering more SDG-related adult learning to all individuals and leaders from politics, business, industry, social and civil organizations, education institutions, media, etc. In this process, it is vital to ensure future-ready training for higher education teachers and adult educators and to provide more flexible learning pathways.

Reaffirming a human rights-based approach to (higher) education is also essential. Not everyone will attain higher or adult education, but everyone should at least have the same opportunities for inclusive and equitable quality education at the level to which they aspire. It is important to stress that educational inequalities are not just an educational, social, or

⁴ Global Survey Report: The contribution of higher education institutions to lifelong learning https://www.uil.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2022/05/2022_05_13_HEI_reportWHEC.pdf
An analysis of the results of the global survey provides insights into the current state of LLL in 399 HEIs worldwide. It provides many aspects that need to be taken into consideration in turning universities into LLL institutions.

economic issue but also a moral one. All actors involved have a moral responsibility to do all they can to ensure proper support so that everyone has equal access to quality education, regardless of their family, social, financial, or community background, and equal opportunities to realise their full potential and successfully adapt to the changing world.

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