

Summary of Doctoral (PhD) Thesis

PERCEPTIONS OF EQUITY AND INCLUSIVE ATTITUDES AMONG HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

Comparative research in the cross border area of Hungary
and Romania

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The context and purpose of the dissertation

The concept and different interpretations of educational equity and inclusion are strongly connected to the current dominant trends of the society and educational policies. In the welfare era, the principles of *acceptance of all* and *equal opportunities* were designated as the main educational goals. In the neoliberal era *quality*, and in this context, *equity* became the main normative concepts within the educational system. In my dissertation I sought to answer the question how the principle of equity, which includes in its meaning - beyond equal opportunities and inclusion - also the aim to compensate for disadvantages, is put in practice in the world of higher education.

Admittance *en masse* into higher education is a rather new phenomenon in our region, which started only in the last decade of the XXth century. It occurred at a time when due to different political, economic, social changes the image of higher education changed radically, and when the higher education previously based on a strict selection opened its gates to larger categories of population, thus starting the process of expansion in higher education. As a result of this opening tendency the population from higher education started to diversify. Today we are finding next to the traditional type students with intellectual or economically privileged family background also those student groups which require special attention: belonging to

disadvantaged communities, living with disabilities or in ethnic/religious minority situation, belonging to the Roma community or being foreign students. The integration into higher education of all these special categories of students is simultaneously an educational, social and economic challenge.

From the 90's onwards, due to the change of paradigm taking place within the international research related to the topic, high quality education is expected to be based on *equity*, to be at the same time successful and equitable, so that the social and economic background, the gender, ethnic and family affiliation of the students could not be hindering factors in education. The equitable educational system is fair and inclusive, supporting the students to achieve their goals in spite of the formal or informal hindrances which come from the outside and without decreasing the quality of education. One of the dimensions of equity is providing equal chances. This dimension, defined on the basis of social justice, guaranties the same treatment for everybody without any discrimination and it also regards important to compensate the hindrances of the students coming from disadvantaged background, as otherwise the previous differences will remain or will reappear ((Lannert 2004, Mogyorósi 2009, Castelli et al.2012).

On the other hand, critics of the neoliberal interpretation of equity have emphasized that while equity is a perfectionist concept of equal opportunities, in reality the neoliberal economy considers as priorities *productivity* and *competitiveness*, rather than *equity*, and the

withdrawing state does not want to fight for equal opportunities for entire social layers. The neoliberal ideology considers it natural that competition is associated with inequality, injustice, and individualism, the effects of which create an increasing inequality (Méndez-Ramírez 2015).

The structural approach of educational equity (Unterhalter 2009) concludes that in a democratic society macro-social equity must be stated in the law, while micro-social equity must be implemented in practical terms at grassroots level. The equity from above refers to laws, rules which prescribe justice, tolerance and fairness in the relationships among people, but the equity from below is related to multicolor and subjective liberty. This means in everyday life putting together the macro and micro levels' visions, the aim to have a `good life` and good relationships between those with different social backgrounds or belonging to different cultures.

The concept of equity is linked to individual diversity, freedom and individualism, according to Unterhalter's (2009) model. In contrast, there are views that emphasize the role of elementary communities in order to reduce exclusion, diminish disadvantages and increase educational efficiency. Pupils learn to socialize in communities, and the norms and values of these communities as the context of educational processes have enormous influence on the individual's performance (Pusztai 2004).

Starting from a student-centred educational policy research approach (Kozma 2009), the dissertation is discussing issues linked to the concept of *equity in higher education* in two EU member countries, Hungary and Romania, confronting the public policy views with the students' perceptions. The aim of my research was to study *equity in higher education* and the *opportunities to develop an inclusive higher education environment* in the light of *student attitudes towards at-risk peers*.

The *specialized bibliographical background* of the dissertation has a multidisciplinary character. The higher education equity has been studied from various perspectives, including sociological, socio-psychological, children and youth care, educational and pedagogical research. In order to set the stage for my comparative analysis in a cross border context, I tried to integrate the topic into a larger perspective, comparing not only the Hungarian and Romanian situation, but also taking into account European values and educational practices.

In my work I study the question of equity in higher education, the starting point being the legislation which governs the higher educational system in Hungary and in Romania. I put against each other the system which leads the education policy (macro-environment) and the students' perception and attitudes (micro-environment). I discuss the students' opinions about equity, and I also analyze the inclusive attitudes towards the so called at-risk students within the student population of the Hungary - Romania cross border area.

The study of social equity within the higher education can be regarded as relevant from different perspectives. From educational policy viewpoint it highlights the macro-social tendencies, and through the process of comparing the two countries reveals the similarities, differences and deficits, thus providing important information to those who work out the equity policies in the future. As from the higher education system's perspective the inclusion of the student groups which require special attention is a problem which might affect the quality of education, nowadays it is not enough to formally declare the principle of equity in the educational policy, but it is necessary to investigate also the subjective dimensions of the question: the student population's equity perceptions and their accepting/rejecting attitudes.

In the last few decades the question has become important also from the point of view of the social norms and the change of accepting attitudes. To reveal the inclusive/ exclusive attitudes towards the youth of the same age helps to determine the factors which influence the social maturity of the young adults and which make measurable the distances between the different social categories.

The study of student visions puts in the center of attention the problem of developing the inclusive attitudes of students within the higher education system, which influence the situation of at-risk students and it also has a career socialization role. This is mostly important in the case of *teacher training students* because they will become the new teachers' of tomorrow's society. The inclusive

attitudes within student community are also important as these are preconditions of social equity and have a forecasting role influencing social maturity, the occupational integration and the relation to the future job of the students (Johnson 1981, Johnson and Johnson 2008).

In a recent research, Pusztai and Szabo (2014) examined how students think about the compensational practice and what kind of typology can be drawn in relation to student attitudes towards at-risk students. They analyzed student attitudes towards different forms of supporting their at-risk peers according to three levels: *having relationship*, *financial* and *non-financial support*. The aim was to identify personal and social explanations of the accepting attitudes. The research had shown that student views are not homogenous. Students think about the different groups having special needs with different levels of readiness to accept. It resulted that being member of a religious community has a significant effect on positive student attitudes towards disadvantaged peers. It had been also revealed that student acceptance is highest towards economically disadvantaged colleagues and the lowest in relation towards Roma students. These results can become very important in developing institutional policies which can then lead to a mentality change. The mentioned research mostly focused on student attitudes towards peers living with disabilities, therefore, in order to develop the analysis further, I found necessary to include in my approach also other groups mentioned in the

higher education laws of the two countries: *students with disadvantaged background, living in national minority situation* and *Roma students*.

Through *an educational policy case study* I had laid next to each other the vision and practice of the two EU countries with common border and shared historical background, in order to find similarities and differences in the legislation which regulates higher education. I proposed to find out how decision-makers define various categories of special students, in what difference-terminology do they think, and what kind of equal chances and compensational practice do they recommend for supporting the special needs students. Summarizing the characteristics of the legal provisions in Romania and Hungary, it can be concluded that their use of concepts is different, but the disadvantaging factors to which they refer are the same: low income, marginalised living area, disability, cumulated disadvantages background, national minority status and being a foreign student.

The Romanian legal system does not define the economically disadvantaged, cumulatively disadvantaged or other categories which require support, only mentions some key concepts and principles in this regard. The Romanian legislation focuses mostly on assuring the basic human rights and providing fundamental social support, but is missing the aim-group orientated inclusive guiding principle and the long term and consistent mechanism of intervention (Berei 2015). Analysing the implementation of equity related policies within the Romanian institutions of higher education, Jamil et al. (2015) found that though

the Romanian government's educational policy has aimed in 2013-2016 to assure social equitability, it didn't work out a strategy concerning the social dimension of the higher education. There is no legal provision stating which groups are underrepresented in higher education and there is no plan for putting compensatory measures into practice.

The Hungarian legislation has undergone a continuous development since 1993, being characterized by a clear and well defined conceptual framework, the compensational interventions having a consistent system of aims. In Hungary, there is a working cooperation mechanism between the educational system and the child-care system when it comes to define the situation of disadvantaged and highly disadvantaged children, while in Romania cooperation between these two sectors appears mainly at the level of principles. In both countries is missing the monitoring system of students requiring special attention (V. Gönczi 2015, Szemerszki 2016).

In spite of the differences between the vision and practice of the two countries I concluded that the problems are to a large extent the same, and both in Hungary and Romania the law prescribes *financial and non-financial means of support* for members of the groups in need.

Research method

The quantitative international survey data used in my analysis was collected and made available by the Higher Educational Research

Centre of the University of Debrecen, Hungary, in 2012 and 2014-2015, by HERD (Higher Education for Social Cohesion Cooperative Research and Development in a Cross – border Area Project HURO/0901/253/2.2.2.), by TESSCEE (Teacher Education Survey in Central and Eastern Europe) by SZAKTARNET (TÁMOP – 4.1.2.B.2-13/1-2013-0009 - Professional Service and Research Supporter of the Regional Teacher Training Network in North Hungary) and by IESA (Research Application of the University of Debrecen RH/885/2013). My analysis had focused on students from Hungary and Romania. I used the SPSS 22 statistical program to analyze data.

The higher education institutions included in research (N)

	Higher education institutions	HERD 2012	IESA 2014-2015
RO	University of Oradea	714	15
	Partium Christian University in Oradea	407	40
	Emanuel University in Oradea	136	-
	Babes – Bolyai University	66	138
	Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania	-	126
HU	University of Debrecen	1118	1061
	Debrecen Reformed Theological University	25	22
	College of Nyíregyháza	152	134
	Total number of students	2618	1536

For the purposes of current research by *at-risk student groups* I understand those students who are in one or more of the following situations: economically disadvantaged family background, living with disabilities, being Roma, living in national minority situation or being foreign students.

Research results

1. In the first part of the analysis I studied student views concerning *financial or non-financial support towards at-risk peers*, confronting the educational policy outlooks with the students' views in connection to equity (equal chances and compensation). I also included as a third dimension *the willingness to have relationship*, as I found that connectional disadvantage is a major problem. I aimed to find out to what extent do the students agree with educational expansion, chance equality, compensational practice, how do they think about the students' intention to help, how content they are with the equal treatment and collaboration within student communities. I also examined what the students think about the different educational policies, about financial or nonfinancial forms of support and about having relationship with students of special needs.

My results confirm the conclusion drawn by Pusztai and Szabo (2014) that the supporting/excluding opinions are not homogenous. Both types of attitudes are present on the two sides of the border. Students are most supporting towards their economically disadvantaged colleagues and less supporting with their Roma student peers. The students' preferences are in connection with the geographical area (country) to which they belong. In this regard, there is a difference between the opinion of the Hungarian and Romanian students.

2. In the second part of my research I studied *the intensity of students' willingness to have relationship with at-risk peers*, analyzed according to three dimensions: *willingness to be a group mate, to live together in student lodgings and to live in a couple-relationship*.

Having as starting point fundamental social-psychology ideas discussed by Szabó (2001), further I supposed that student preferences have a structure which helps to understand the characteristics of student attitudes. On both data bases I made an attitude- structure analysis and I concluded that in each case there are three attitude-factors: *attitudes related to negative drawbacks* – towards those living with economic disadvantages or with disabilities; *attitudes towards ethnic minority students* and *attitudes towards foreign students*. The attitudes related to negative drawbacks present the same structure as the Hungarian educational policy, which offers preferential treatment to the candidates with disadvantaged economic background or living with disabilities when entering the higher educational system. The attitudes towards the Roma students were coupled with the ethnic minority factor or sometimes appeared to be a separate factor. This situation reflects in fact the two different interpretations of the `Roma problem` in Central-Eastern European countries: one which sustains that the Roma are a national and cultural minority, and the other saying they are a social group with cumulative socio-economic disadvantages. In function of time and space the one or the other attitude is domineering (Forray R. and Kozma 2013).

3. In the third phase I concentrated on the students' preferences in their relationships, studying if their attitudes towards students who require special attention are in connection with their *extracurricular activities*. Based on Coleman (1988), I supposed that the students who are more active in charity, civil or church groups, communities and organizations are more supportive with students who require special attention than those who are not so active in such kind of groups. I studied two dimensions of how they undertake relationship: *among group mates* and when *living together*. Having more than one variable in the study, I concluded that extracurricular activities have a positive effect on the students' supporting attitudes. Moreover, among the factors belonging to social background, the country's influence and the personal financial situation could be also in connection with the students' attitudes.

4. Finally, I analyzed also *the including/excluding attitudes of students enrolled in teacher training programs*, obtaining the same results as previously: the students' attitude is not homogenous, they are more supporting with disadvantaged and less supporting with the Roma; they agree more with the financial or nonfinancial support for the disadvantaged, for those living with disabilities or for Roma group mates than with having direct relationship with them. In the views of the students enrolled in teacher training programs, the attitudes of support and exclusion are present in the same time. The different groups are judged differently and students think about them in different terms of social distance and support. This finding confirms the

theoretical model outlined by Skrabski and Kopp (2009), which states that people tend to move between the excluding (polarizing) and the supporting (unifying) attitudes. Moreover, in the cross border area the students from Romania are more characterized by inclusive, supporting attitudes compared to the students from Hungary.

The involvement in teacher training programs and the participation in extracurricular – charity, volunteering, civil or church communities - groups also increases the chance that the students will have supporting attitudes towards those group mates who need special attention. In connection with the teacher training students I made the hypothesis that there is a connection between the supporting/excluding attitudes related to relationships among peers and future work plans. Studying the school preferences of students enrolled in teacher training programs, Bocsi and Rákó (2015) found that the students' plans about the future cannot be seen as homogenous. According to the results of my study, the correlation between the attitudes of teacher training students towards disadvantaged group mates and the students future work plans is a positive one. This means that the more supportive students are towards their peers with negative drawbacks or towards those from different ethnic groups, the greater are the chances that they will prefer to work in schools where Roma, special needs or economically disadvantaged pupils are present in high numbers. These effects are transcending social background differences. The results of research confirm that the attitudes of teacher training students towards

disadvantaged student peers have important effects for the development of their future inclusive attitudes as teachers.

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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (4)

- Berei, E. B.:** Hallgatói színfoltok és elköteleződések - vallásos hallgatók iránti kortárkapcsolati attitűdök a Kárpát-medencében.
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Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (1)

6. **Berei, E. B.**: How perceive students their colleagues with special needs? Romania and Hungary universities.
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7. **Berei, E. B.**: "Everyone is Important" Higher Education Students in Part Time Programs.
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Hungarian conference proceedings (2)

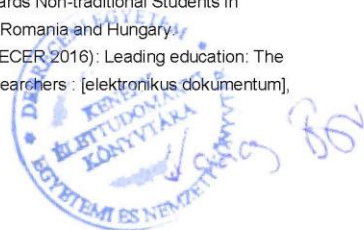
8. **Berei, E. B.**: Gyermekotthoni nevelési környezet és a társadalmi beilleszkedés esélyei Romániában.
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12. **Berei, E. B.**: Utam a szociális szakmához.

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