

## Persistence in tertiary music education in Hungary and Slovakia

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Recent changes in higher education have not left the structure of art education. Now, in accordance with the Bologna Process in Hungary and Slovakia also, music and other arts are taught on two levels, in bachelor's and master's programs. The art schools offer degrees in music field in interpretation, composition, and musicology at all levels: Bachelor, Master, and Doctor. In Hungary, to become an art teacher, students must participate in undivided teacher education that offers a master's degree. The schools creatively respond to European trends and they try to create optimal conditions for education in music art. That is why the student and his artistic, social, and other needs are at the center of the interest. The paper describes the studies, the determinants of their successful completion, and the career choices of music art graduates. In our qualitative analysis, we investigate educational problems of the field, possible reasons behind dropping out, the difficulties of obtaining a degree, and the special retentiveness of music education based on interviews with faculty and institution directors. Our research is intended to contribute to the decline of attrition, because understanding the reasons behind the phenomenon may help institutions assist students in the completion of their studies and graduation.

**Keywords:** tertiary art education; music education; retentiveness of music education

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Generally, young people choose a field in higher education according to their interests, and with the hope of the best professional training and employment opportunities. Dropping out of higher education without graduation is a universal phenomenon, although with varying rates by country (Pusztai, 2009). A major policy goal of the European Union is to increase the overall level of education and thereby improve employment figures. Student attrition has been in the focus of education research and sociology for years. In 2013, a comprehensive report was prepared for the European Commission on the matter, which found six main reasons behind the problem: sociocultural, structural, political, institutional, personal, and academic factors (Quinn, 2013). By comparing data from different countries, it has been found that the difference between the student input and output of higher education is the largest in Hungary, Poland, and Italy. The underlying factors, however, may sometimes be country-specific. Various causes for non-completion often intertwine and might reinforce one another, which is why it is so difficult for researchers to determine the contribution of each factor (Davies & Elias, 2003; Duque, Duque, & Suriñach, 2012; Yorke & Longden, 2008). In Spain, an 8-year longitudinal study by Lassibille and Gómez (2008) has found that age is a significant risk of attrition, because older students and those who delay entry into higher education are more likely to discontinue their studies before graduation. In Italy, reduction of higher education costs in recent years has decreased attrition, although researchers

have shown that successful graduation is strongly supported by persistent students' social and family background, as well as by their cultural capital. It has also been found that persistence is heavily influenced by socioeconomic status (Fényes & Pusztai, 2006; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Pusztai, 2011; Thayer, 2000; Vickers, Lamb, & Hinkley, 2003). Some studies argue that attrition can be attributed to demographic changes (Jones, 2008; Long, Ferrier, & Heagney, 2006). Tinto and Bean, two great American theorists of attrition research, consider higher education dropouts as people who leave the social system (Molnár, 2012). In France, institutional changes to aid students' successful higher education careers have been brought about as early as 1996 (Bajomi, 2003). By surveying 377 students, Bennett (2003) has shown that the decision to drop out is mainly influenced by financial difficulties (Lukács & Sebő, 2015). In Hungary, universities are not as efficient in helping an increased number of heterogeneous students toward graduation due to the expansion of higher education (Varga, 2010).

Based on analyses of the hindering factors, multiple central policy goals have been set to help successful graduation. The Europe 2020 Strategy, in accordance with the cohesion policy of the European Union, has declared that non-completion rate should be reduced below 10% and at least 40% of young people should get a degree [1603/2014. (XI. 4.) Government Decree].

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Besides central actions, education institutions can also develop their own methods to resolve the problem and to support successful graduation. Prevention and intervention are aimed at the reduction of non-completion risk before the problem arises by providing help. Individual competency development and resolution of personal problems could largely account for diminishing attrition rates. It is important that student offices, education organizers, and career offices also take part in these activities (Fenyves et al., 2017).

The Hungarian Middle-term Dropout Prevention Strategy (*A végzettség nélküli iskolaelhagyás elleni középtávú stratégia, 2014*) was launched in November 2014 by the 1603/2014. (XI. 4.) Government Decree (Fenyves et al., 2017). To aid graduation, it prescribes the creation of intersector strategies, and measures to enhance the quality, effectiveness, and success of the education system.

Even though attrition is a universal phenomenon, the potential causes of which have been studied extensively, few people have analyzed tertiary art education from the perspective of attrition. By following 175,000 students in Texas for 5 years, it has been found that art education decreases the likelihood of dropping out of high school significantly (Thomas, Singh, & Klopfenstein, 2015). These findings prove that art education could be a powerful tool of education reforms. Mahoney and Cairns (1997) have investigated the impact of extracurricular activities on non-completion on different levels of education. The longitudinal study of 392 secondary students has shown that attrition rates among disadvantaged students are significantly lower, if they have participated in extracurricular activities. Based on correlations, the study has reinforced the fact that attrition is so complex that it cannot be traced back to a single cause with certainty. Dropping out could be the student's rational decision, but it might also be a decision in which the circumstances leave no other option. Examples for this include situations when students drop out due to health reasons, their increased role in the family, and changes in their financial background. When students drop out as a result of a rational decision, they are often not interested in the subjects and cannot get along with teachers and fellow students (Medway & Penney, 1994). By surveying bachelor's students in Australia, Kemran Mestan (2016) has found that those who are less motivated and goal-oriented give up their studies more easily because of personal problems and environmental influences. Slovak art education, which provides artistic education in the field of music art, emerged in 1949, when the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava was established. The need of expanding educational capacities in 1997 called for the establishment of another university institution – the Academy of Arts in Banská Bystrica. At these two state universities, professional musicians currently receive their qualification. During nearly 70 years of history, arts education has undergone many transformations, innovations, and fundamental conceptual changes that should have contributed to shaping modern education in the context of current trends. The National Education and Training Program for 2018–2027 “Quality and Accessible Education for Slovakia” is being validated. It focuses on the Europe 2020 strategy, which is the basic international framework defining the educational aims and goals in the member states of the European Union.

Concerning artistic education, two main indicators that need to be precisely defined and analyzed come to the surface. They relate to the ratio of university-educated population and the employment rate of fresh graduates. While preparing a new Slovak educational strategy, in the context of global university area, many indicators have been examined in detail in the retrospective period of more than 10 years. In the paper, the relevant monitoring results are also formed by the official statistics of the Ministry of Education published in the Statistical Yearbooks, by the empirical findings of the study departments of the art universities, and by the students' statements.

## THE STATE OF TERTIARY MUSIC EDUCATION

The distinction between creators and performers can be found in the monograph of McCarthy, Lowell, Brooks, and Zakaras (2001), which employs a system-wide approach in summarizing the diverse and complex changes of culture in the 21st century with the whole spectrum performing arts in focus: theatre, opera, dance, and music. According to them, the tertiary music education includes both performing and creating activities.

Through the Bologna Process, Hungarian higher education was changed significantly in 2006 from its previous structure, which differentiated between universities and colleges. The new system in the field of arts, launched in 2007, has a two-level approach: students get their bachelor's degree first, then decide to become teachers or performing artists, and pursue the respective master's degree. Following the structural reform of music teacher education, those who wish to teach music on the primary level must take part in an undivided degree program, which offers a master's degree and lasts 4 + 1 years for both musicology and instrument specializations. The education of secondary music teachers is not uniform. In this case, music theory teachers must complete a 5 + 1 year training, whereas teachers of instruments ought to supplement their bachelor's and master's degree with a 1-year teacher training. For music teachers, the possibility to specialize only on musicology or “singing and music” ended as two specialization fields must be chosen in the new system. The program for primary teachers of singing and music can now be complemented by a musicology degree program, both of which last 4 + 1 years. In the education of music organizers, a general subject specialization must also be selected besides music. If the “music and singing” subject is paired with a 5 + 1 year degree, it becomes an art subject instead of a general one (Vas, 2014). The two-semester Music Teacher master's program is only open for teachers with a college degree of the same specialization. By contrast, the two-semester Music Performer and Teacher master's program only accepts musicians who either study to become performers or obtained a university degree for performers in the previous system. The situation is even more complicated with the introduction of further types of training in 2017. The four-semester Music Teacher master's program and the four-semester Music Performer and Teacher master's program are open to music performers who have a different specialization and a master's degree or a university degree from the

previous system, and to music teachers with a college degree of a different specialization (<https://www.felvi.hu/>). The changes described above have resulted in a non-transparent system with various parallel trainings, which is troublesome to navigate. Experience has shown that applicants have difficulty choosing the degree program, which is suitable for them as well as understanding the admission criteria of different degree programs for music teachers and performers.

Unlike other bachelor's programs, the bachelor's degree obtained in music education does not qualify graduates for any job. As described above, there is an extra hurdle in the current system of art education: applicants must go through a separate selection process for teacher training.

Although ACT LXXX of 1993 on Higher Education states that tertiary education is provided on a universal basis (Ladányi, 1995; Polónyi, 2015), tertiary art education still requires a professional competency exam, which is a substitute for the entrance examination of the previous system.

The expansion of higher education is also prevalent in art education. According to data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, there were 4,094 art students in the academic year 2001/2002, which grew to 6,487 by the academic year 2014/2015 (<http://www.ksh.hu/interaktiv/mstat2014/grafikonok.html>).

Experts have pointed out that about 5% of art students take part in international mobility opportunities, and have argued that having studied abroad has the greatest significance among musicians (Kucsera & Szabó, 2017).

Only 51.2% of music performer students have worked outside their profession, which is the lowest rate of all fields. Following media students (80%), music performer students are the second most likely to work within their profession during their studies (71.7%). Upon graduation, almost half (43.7%) of these students have full-time employment already (Graduate Career Tracking System data analyzed by Kucsera & Szabó, 2017). All graduates of music faculties can shortly find employment, with 72.4% of them as teachers and 12.4% of them abroad (Graduate Career Tracking System data analyzed by Kucsera & Szabó, 2017).

Available data suggest that the interest in studying musical art is stable. In spite of the unfavorable demographic situation, which significantly affects Slovak education in negative way (Herich, 2016), the number of applications for admission to music studies is not decreasing, and it is higher than the planned quota in art schools. Compared to other schools, we also find interesting the ratio of admitted applicants to those who actually start studying. In music art, only 1%–3% of students who were admitted to schools do not enroll in studies. This is because the students are thoroughly informed about particular university in advance, they take preparatory lessons and consultations, and they have a well-defined idea of the field they are planning to study, of the pedagogues who work in the school, and of economic and social conditions of study (such as dormitories, job opportunities in the region of the school, etc.). For comparison, in technical fields and humanities, applicants submit on average three or more application letters, and they “test” the admissions opportunities – frequently in unrelated specializations.

In statistics based on the data provided by the Ministry of Education, arts schools are ranked first considering the number of students who have finished studies. Almost 93% of admitted students graduate. We will analyze the dominant determinants of this phenomenon after a brief description of music art studies. In accordance with the Bologna Declaration, the study is done in three stages: Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral. After successful completion of the state final examinations, the titles of Bc. (Bachelor), Mgr. art. (Master of Arts), and ArtD. (Doctor of Arts) are given to the students. The core instrument of organizing and recording a study is a credit system that is consistent with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). Full-time studies in the first level last for 3 years, in the second level for 2 years, and the doctoral study for 3 years long (4 years in the part-time form). Studying at state universities is free of charge. The legislation enables the universities to require the fees only from part-time students and those who already graduated one college/university. Paying students are already employed, they have own income, and on request, the school can provide them with a repayment schedule. Therefore, the financial factor does not become the reason for leaving the study.

The study programs in existing universities are not identical, but overall, the main courses can be divided into three areas:

- Interpretation art – it contains solo play on all instruments of orchestral sections (string instruments, wind instruments, and percussions), keyboard instruments, singing, church music, and chamber music.
- Composition and conducting (orchestral and choral).
- Musicology (music theory and dramaturgy).

Accordingly, the student acquires the qualification in playing a specific musical instrument, in singing, conducting or musicology. Graduate could work as a concert artist (soloist, chamber or orchestral player in professional orchestras, choirs, and ensembles), conductor, composer, or musicologist. If (s)he plans to work in the pedagogical sphere, (s)he must complete additional teaching studies, which lasts 4 semesters. This will allow him/her to become a college qualified educator at all school levels (DPŠ).

Artistic study is characterized by a high level of difficulty and it requires a long-term preparation mainly at the conservatory (in Slovakia, the Conservatory is a secondary art school that lasts 4–6 years). We consider this long-term preparation/crystallized specialization to be one of the most important determinants of musicians' successful completion of university studies. Students come to the university with a clear idea of individualized learning, and of requirements and responsibilities, and they have strong motivation and personal ambitions to become qualified artists. We do not even register differences in foreign students who make effort to finish the studies – we register around 10% of foreign students (which is significantly more than in other universities). They want to study with particular renowned pedagogues who they know from international workshops and concerts, or they want to study at a department absent in their homeland, or they choose the attractiveness of European education with a perspective of excellent working possibilities after returning to their country (mainly Asian and African students). Non-negligible role play pragmatic

reasons, such as residence visa, family member living in Europe, and so on.

A relevant stabilizing factor is also the age of students of musical art. While other university students are enrolled at colleges/universities at the age of 19 years, the age limit for musicians is shifted by an average of 5 years higher. Talented individuals, professionals with a clear direction to achieve their goals, enter the first year of studies, and they make an effort to achieve these goals. They solve eventual problems by interrupting their studies, and after overcoming them, they return to school. They are led by a personality potential supported by cognitive, social, and instrumental motivation (Bulková & Hibký, 2016).

A specific and unique characteristic of musical art students is the amount of work experience. Almost all students, while attending the school, work in their field of studies (mostly part-time or occasionally): they teach at primary and secondary art schools; they are members of symphonic, opera, and chamber ensembles and choirs; they act on the opera and singing scene; they perform in folklore ensembles; they accept occasional offers of concert art agencies; they work in the managerial and organizational field. After completing their studies, they continue to work. Therefore, they rank last in graduate unemployment statistics.

About 7% of students are dropping out of musical art schools. Each year, the universities create accurate records that summarize the reasons for this phenomenon. We can say that the decision to leave studies has a rational basis, but it is made under the influence of current and often acute causes and conditions. Priority is given to working reasons when a student prefers an attractive and lucrative job offer, and (s)he is aware that the employer will not allow him/her to attend classes on regular basis. Some important reasons are in connection with family and health conditions, such as long-term family care, maternity, illness required long-term treatment, or disability of the playing apparatus (hands, spine, teeth, etc.). Further, the decision to continue studying at foreign higher educational institution is relevant, which is made most often after participating in the mobility program Erasmus+.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

Changes in the number of tertiary students have not decreased in the past years.

The magnitude of and reasons behind attrition: changing of social background, health problems, studies abroad, and working while studying.

The education structure is very complicated and it is difficult to transfer between programs.

The retentiveness of art education is mostly emotional.

## ANALYSIS

In our qualitative analysis, we have interviewed directors of four art and music faculties of integrated universities in Hungary and Slovakia ( $N=5$ ) about the characteristics of the specific field and persistence in tertiary art education.

The interviews have revealed that changes in the number of tertiary music students are influenced by many factors,

which include modifications in the structure of programs, demographics, and repertoire. According to statistics by the website "felvi.hu," there was a spike in applications when the bachelor's program was launched. After great initial expectations, interest in music bachelor's programs decreased, although in recent years, there seems to be a gradual rise in the number of applicants. Overall, the number of students in the field is relatively stable. It is important, nevertheless, to find the right balance among instruments in the admission process, so orchestras could remain operational.

## RESULTS

The interviewees have described several possible reasons behind attrition. A significant one is failure to obtain the necessary language certificate. Practices in this regard vary at some institutions, language courses are not part of the curriculum, students can improve their language skills at the language departments of the university, which might reduce attrition. Even where weekly language courses can be found in the curriculum, some students have difficulty obtaining the required certificate. It is a recently widespread phenomenon that students transfer from bachelor's programs to undivided programs, which offer a master's degree to delay the fulfillment of the language certificate requirement. An increasing number of students, however, have already earned an advanced-level certificate, as they have realized the importance and worth of languages in exchange opportunities.

In some cases, students drop out because they are not able to meet the requirements of the degree program. This can occur in different variations: three failed exams in the same course, lack of registration for a semester, dropping out without notice, unmet financial obligations, and poor decision to transfer between programs.

Among those whose tuition is not covered by the state, attrition is higher when it is not the students themselves who pay, but someone else. For example, if a corporation that agreed to cover tuition misses the deadline for payment, it causes the student to either miss a semester or drop out. From the perspective of the university, students who transfer to a different degree program or university are also included in attrition rates as they leave their original degree programme without graduation.

Attrition rates among instrumental performers are lower: the most frequent cases are due to health-related problems, which only occur every 3 or 4 years. All musicians dread chronic tenosynovitis, and players of wind instruments are also afraid of dental injuries, as they cannot play with dental prosthesis. If other kinds of health problems arise, students typically miss a semester and then resume their studies.

On rare occasions, attrition is caused by family or financial factors. It is increasingly common that families have difficulty paying for music education and purchasing the necessary instrument.

Studies abroad do not influence attrition rates because all who have taken part in student exchange opportunities and have returned and graduated successfully. In the final year, however, it is unwise to go for an exchange semester, as it is likely to result in delayed graduation.



Working while studying does not seem to influence attrition, although it may impact academic performance. For instance, some students are invited to perform on a cruise ship for one or two semesters. They usually delay their studies and, consequently, graduate later but do not drop out.

At one institution, students whose tuition is funded by the state are more likely drop out. Those who pay for a degree program are more motivated to graduate. If students run out of the limited number of semesters for which the state covers the costs, they often drop out. However, if they have a student loan, they are more inclined to graduate.

We may conclude that attrition is generally not the consequence of a rational decision but that of circumstance.

The interviews have revealed that attrition rates are the highest in bachelor's programs. Students who realize that they cannot profit from the bachelor's program as they will not be admitted to a master's program for performers generally transfer to an undivided teacher training program, which offers a master's degree within the institution. This increases their chances to graduate and is often encouraged by faculty. A similar situation can arise from professional considerations or because the necessary language certificate has not been obtained. It is very rare for teacher and students to transfer to a bachelor's program, which only happens, when someone starts to exhibit great artistic qualities later than usual. In this case, the change is worth it.

At certain institutions, there is no restriction in the admission to undivided teacher training, which may cause some people to start the program but drop out soon. However, if someone has managed to get into a master's program for performers, they will surely graduate. It is hardly possible to become a doctor, economist, or engineer with a degree in music; therefore, the options are limited. Those who have earned a bachelor's and a master's degree and apply for the 1-year supplementary teacher training are mature enough to assess the importance of degrees, which is why none of them have dropped out.

Compared to higher education as a whole, tertiary music education has higher completion rates. This can be explained by various factors. First, it is only dedicated people who apply to music programs, with 8–10 years of previous training and a commitment to the profession and career. Applicants have put a lot of hard work into music. This is especially true for those who play an instrument, whereas singers might have had less training previously. Second, as we have established, music is a unique field. It is difficult to leave music for another field, partly because it is so rewarding. Finally, music degrees come with certain and stable employment opportunities, which provide a motivating force for many students to graduate.

The retentiveness of art education lies partly in students' very strong commitment to pursue this career, which requires extraordinary willpower. Moreover, retentiveness may come from the linear and separated nature of music education, that is, there are very few connections with education in other fields. Music is unlike medicine, which is a program that allows students to decide on specializing as a surgeon or dermatologist much later. If someone studies to become a pianist, they might also be interested in theory, composition, and conducting orchestras or choirs, but at the end of the day, they are committed to music. There is also a

spiritual element: it is not possible to identify with Roman law spiritually; however, the Ballade in G minor cannot be performed without spiritual involvement. Furthermore, it is worthwhile to emphasize again the strong motivating force of guaranteed employment after graduation.

In conclusion, tertiary music education has a safety net, which helps students graduate successfully. This is partly due to students' laborious preparation in previous years and the specific nature of the field, which makes it difficult to switch to other disciplines. The appeal of certain employment in the ever-changing 21st century must also be mentioned. Finally, music requires a rather intensive spiritual–emotional background, which is relied on during performances as well as social interactions (Szűcs, 2014).

## CONCLUSIONS

In Slovakia, the music faculties in art schools are ranked first by comparing the quantitative and qualitative indicators of education and research gained annually by the Academic Ranking and Rating Agency. The music faculties' placement is reached by updating the study programs, by innovating the course contents, and by providing a wide variety of elective courses. The stuff constantly supports students' interest in learning their individual work both compulsory and out-of-school activities. The music departments try to create conditions for an efficient and high-quality education process. These efforts have a positive response from both applicants and students.

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