

THESES FOR Ph. D. DISSERTATION

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**The Role of Companies in Adult Learning in the
Northern Plain Region**



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**The Role of Companies in Adult Education
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1. The aim of dissertation, description of theme

The theme of the dissertation is the presentation of the characteristics of adult learning processes in five economic sectors in the Northern Plain Region.

More than one discipline deals with training and learning at work. The theory and practice of learning and training taking place in worklife are increasingly important for company, organisation and work-related research, as well as for our frame of interpretation, i.e. adult education.

In our estimation the separation of general adult education from work- or economy-related adult training is a significant change that took place during the on-going structural transformation of adult training and education (the aim of which transformation is to define its scientific aims and practical functions). This tendency has been visible for the past one and a half decades both in domestic and international adult education and training.

Thus, the topicality of our dissertation and research seems to be obvious. In our work we have applied new theoretical approaches such as the relationship of innovation and adult education or the changes in the conditions of adult learning and the student region. The above-mentioned topicality of the dissertation is underlined by the growing amount of domestic and international research and surveys related to this theme, but the heterogeneity of these (e.g., in connection with the aims, methods, etc.) makes it impossible for us to come up

with a coherent, innovative model. However, we undertook and succeeded in creating a detailed survey and description of one important field within adult training and learning, using natural indices and quantitative analyses.

Two important segments of our research are regionality and sectorality. These segments mean that our research area is the Northern Plain Region, and the analysed industries are those three (a producing and two service) sectors that employ the most numerous employees in the region.

2. Research methods

The research was based on the fundamental methods of statistics and geographic information system. We had the questionnaire filled out between November 2002 and March 2003. The questionnaire – the title of which is *The Examination of the Human Resource Characteristics of Companies in the Northern Plain Region* – is rather lengthy (37 pages) and it contains altogether 123 questions in five topics. These topics are the following: 1. general information and general human resource information about the company, 2. workforce fluctuation, 3. professional knowledge and workforce employment, 4. training and development activities, 5. external conditions of the company. **Statistical analyses** involved the usage of already existing statistics, as well as the analyses prepared based on our own information collection. We made use of a **geographic information system** because most spatial processes can be visualized with the help of this method. Since our research takes place in space, we decided to use the geographic information system. As a result, we were able to make the participants and processes easier to analyze and visually more spectacular.

We supplemented these fundamental methods by others, as well. We did **theoretical analysis** in the first parts of the dissertation. Having surveyed the domestic and international technical literature, we added new elements (innovation, student region) to our frame of interpretation.

We also present a **case study** in our dissertation. The special feature of this case study is that the chosen organisations are each Hungarian subsidiary companies of foreign companies. During research an unstructured interview was made. We analysed the accessible documents of the company such as strategic plans or operative plans, and we personally examined the whole organisation-developing process for months.

In our dissertation we often made use of **contrastive analyses**. We employed this method twice in the theoretical part: we analysed the formal institutions of adult training, and we compared the changes in the number of employees in a regional context. On the other hand, we prepared our own analyses based on our own information collection. Another instance of contrastive analysis is in the empirical part of our work: we compared our questionnaire results with the similarly conducted research results of two other Hungarian regions. Although there are certain differences both in the questionnaire and the target group, we still believe that we were able to do analyses that are adequate for scientific methodology.

We also analysed **various documents – mostly planning and development** ones. We used those planning documents that were made based on the county, but even more so those that were based on the region.

3. Summary of the dissertation results

3.1. The number and proportion of those taking part in adult training and learning is growing.

In our analysis we observe that in the sectors and during the period examined there has been a growth in the number of adults who took part in various training and learning activities. On the other hand, when looking at the number of the training participants in a time series cross-section, there seems to be a certain standstill concerning the expansion of training and learning. It is also visible that the prime movers of the sectors' training activity are the improvement of competitive position, the development of technology and products as well as quality assurance. There were no great changes in regulations that affected the participation in professional trainings significantly, however, during the period examined, the number of obligations stemming from Hungary's joining the European Union grew.

3.2. The training of employees is an important, but not the most important factor for the companies.

It can be stated that the training of employees is indeed an important factor in the life of companies, but our results show that this is not typically the most important factor for them. Usually a more significant tool is technological development, often it is quality assurance or the development of a new product. Nevertheless we can say that the above-mentioned factors are all connected to the necessity of gaining new

knowledge or competences, which clearly proves the necessity of training and learning. We feel that although companies usually find it very important to train their employees, in reality they do not make their best to reach this goal. It could even be said that companies consider training to belong to the second most important group that enhances development, but at the same time it is the basis for the most important factors.

3.3. The training and qualification of employees are important factors in improving competitiveness.

Competitiveness and labour productivity are the most significant aspects in the function of economic companies. The competences of the employees and their development are notably affected by the market competition as well as all the important elements of the external environment. However, our research points out that training has a limited role in both creating competitiveness and reacting to changes in the external environment. The crucial importance of competitiveness is more clearly detectable in case of companies bigger in size, so their training policy is characterised by more determination and greater activity.

3.4. The size of the company, its ownership and the sector that it belongs to determine the nature and amount of learning in the economy.

Although in certain instances our analysis surprised us, our hypothesis was verified. In our present research it is these aspects that became our independent variables. It can be stated that the three variables have different roles in terms of their influence: in some cases the size, in other cases the

ownership, and in still other cases the sector seems to be more significant, but these all show a decisive role in training and learning activities. It is expected that these factors will remain the most important ones that determine training.

3.5. There are no considerable regional learning differences on the level of statistical-planning regions.

The above hypothesis is one of the guiding principle and an important question of our research. The concept of the student region appeared in the technical terms of the technical literature in the 1990s and since then the existence or non-existence of this phenomenon have been researched in many parts of the world. Of course there is no exact definition of the concept, but it is used in various senses. In our present research we were only able to detect the idiosyncrasy of the student region to a rather limited extent. In case of the region we chose the planning-statistical level. The reason for this choice was the fact that this segment of the geographic space is big enough for the spatial aspect of learning to appear and thus it was possible to examine it. However, we find that a student region can be understood as a metropolitan area, a culturally homogeneous area that is a complex entity, or an innovative area. The answer to our hypothesis is that it is partially true and partially false. That is, certain differences can be observed, but these differences are only partially due to the idiosyncrasies of the regions, but rather due to the sector, the technology used in the economic activity, the company's size, ownership, management, and company culture in general. Still we can name two idiosyncrasies based on our research and comparative analysis. One of them is the fact that regional differences can mostly be detected in the

learning activity of those workforce groups that are positioned higher in the company hierarchy. The other one is the fact that in economically more developed areas organised trainings are more significant. Therefore, learning at present is not an embedded, region-specific phenomenon in Hungary.

3.6. The direct relationship of learning and R&D: i.e., those companies for which the training of their employees is more important are more likely to have R&D in a greater proportion.

This hypothesis of ours was confirmed. The companies in the case of which R&D activity is present to some extent also have a greater activity in training and learning. The companies that we asked belong to the medium standard technological sectors, where R&D activity is not dominant, and what is more, often not present at all. Competitive sector R&D activity of the region is at a low level, and this may also conserve lower learning activity.

3.7. A higher working position does not necessarily mean greater learning activity.

It is very important for learning research to examine the participants of learning processes. This is often called “stakeholder” analysis. This question is also analysed in motivation analyses, in the estimation of the need for training, and also as part of company culture analyses.

Our prior assumptions were not completely confirmed by the obtained results. The situation is much more complicated than we indicated in our hypothesis. During our work the highest marks were given to the workforce group of skilled labourers, which was followed by the group of office management workers and middle level managers.

Interestingly, in company management the training of middle level managers shows greater activity than that of the upper level managers. Some of the reasons for this phenomenon stem from the position of upper level managers (their lack of time, the particular nature of their work). However, it is the least qualified workforce group that takes part in the smallest amount of training. This fact can be related to two reasons. On the one hand, we can presume that learning motivation, learning ability and learning culture are also at a lower level among unqualified people. On the other hand, we can also presume that if the work of this group is needed despite the fact that they are unqualified, this situation conserves their position within the company or in the outside labour market. In the service sectors the differences are typically greater in terms of the learning and training activity of each workforce group than in the producing sectors.

The appearance of forms of learning in worklife shows significant differences between the separate workforce groups. It was to be expected that practical learning (“learning by doing”) was mostly dominant in case of low-qualified workers, but it was also significant in case of employees in higher positions.

We could also conclude that the need for competence-based knowledge is more characteristic of the service sectors than of the producing sectors. In the latter sectors the role of traditional expertise is more important.

3.8.1. The regional temporal changes of employment influence the previously diagnosed learning characteristics.

In our research we examined the sectors that employ the most employees, strengthening our idea that these economic

sectors are decisive in the idiosyncrasies of the region's training and learning. The changes in the proportion of the different sectors greatly influence the diagnosed learning characteristics. Looking at sectoral analysis the national tendencies are typical (machine and metal-working industries), however, we were also able to detect contradictory tendencies, e.g. the growth in the number of employees in light industry, or the relative fall in the number of employees in the logistic sector compared to national trends. These latter results do not point to the direction of the strengthening of the student region.

3.9. A significant difference can be detected in the importance of training between domestic and international companies.

We consider our observations related to the differences in qualification and competence-development between domestic and Western European employees to be an important achievement of our case study and questionnaire. The differences stem chiefly not from the professional competence but rather from the dissimilarity of cultures.

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