

**THE THESES OF THE DOCTORAL (PHD)
DISSERTATION**

*Part-time students in higher education -
The analysis of part-time students in a cross-border territory*

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I. Objectives of the dissertation

The majority of the literature on higher and adult education claims (e.g. Blaxter et al., Correia–Sarmiento, Eliot–Brna, Kerülő, Török) that adult learning is mainly driven by job-related purposes, in other words, adults learn because of labor market reasons. The question is whether adults mainly study due to career aspirations and in order to make more money in the future or there are some other factors as well influencing their motivations. We also intend to investigate the relations of the drivers, that is to say, whether we can identify certain groups of part-time students in terms of motivation and barriers to participation. We also wished to reveal which variables (such as the respondents' gender, age, level of education, etc.) influence the higher education participation of adult learners.

The major reason for carrying out this educational research is to identify part-time (adult) learners' motives for participation in higher education and to confirm or

reject the hypothesis that adult learners' participation is mainly driven by job-related reasons.

Secondly, we assume that adult learning is not only motivated by money and career-related reasons. However, there is no need to deny that job-related reasons are of primary importance in adult learning. It is also important to understand the other side of the story, the barriers to participation. Based on the relevant literature, the three most important barriers to participation can be related to the cost of education, the time devoted to learning and the geographical distance of the institution. A further research question is if we can identify certain groups of adult learners in terms of barriers to participation, and if so, which variables influence the obstacles.

Thirdly, it is also crucial to understand and reveal the factors affecting adult learners' decisions to apply for a specific higher education institution and program. We also examine the factors influencing the decisions to opt for a higher education institution.

The theoretical framework of the dissertation is rooted in the theories on the expansion of higher education (Kozma, Schofer–Meyer) and Patricia K. Cross’s chain-of-response model on motivational and barrier factors influencing part-learners’ decisions to take part in educational programs.

Previous research is concerned with, among others, the statistical analyses of historical trends and processes, the present and possible future scenarios of higher education. On the other hand, the antecedents of this research are those theoretical considerations which attempt to account for higher education trends. Thirdly, the antecedents of this research are those empirical studies which examine part-time learners at national or institutional level from different perspectives.

II. Research methods

The present dissertation is an educational sociology analysis of part-time (adult) learners in five Hungarian speaking higher education institutions (namely, the University of Debrecen, the College of Nyíregyháza, the

Outsourced Institute of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences Babeş-Bolyai University, II. Ferenc Rákóczi Hungarian Teacher Training College of Transcarpathia, Partium Christian University) in a cross-border territory ('Partium'). The purpose of the research is to reveal and compare adult learners' motivations and barriers to participation in higher education and understand the factors influencing their decision to choose a certain higher education institution.

The 'Partium' region has been in the focus of research at the University of Debrecen Center for Higher Education Research and Development since the 2000s. The three major research projects carried out the following: 1.) *Regional University* research project, 2.) *Tertiary Education and Regional Development* (TERD) and 3.) *Learning Regions in Hungary: From theories to realities* (LeaRn). Participation in these educational research projects has had a major impact on our research interest. Therefore, when we had to find the field of the empirical research we did not have to look

for it, because the field of the research, ('Partium' region) was given.

The empirical research process applies the following four research methods: 1.) the critical review of Hungarian and international (mostly English) literature, 2.) the analysis of educational statistics at international, national and institutional level, 3.) making semi-structured interviews and 4.) conducting EvaSys online questionnaires.

The theoretical-conceptual framework of the dissertation is based on the critical review of Hungarian and English higher education and adult education academic literature. The literature was gathered and analyzed at the Metropolitan Ervin Szabó Library (FSZEK), Budapest, Hungary, at Åarhus University Library, Copenhagen, Denmark and at the Herman B. Well Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, USA. In addition, international databases such as EBSCO, ERIC and JSORE were also used.

Statistics on higher education were analyzed at international, national and institutional level. The analyzed statistics include the OECD and the UNESCO statistics, the Statistical Yearbook of Education 2011/2013, the Higher Education Statistics 2009, the statistics of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH) as well as educational data available on the websites and Educational Offices of the examined higher education institutions.

Before conducting an online questionnaire we also made 26 semi-structured interviews with part-time learners. These interviews were undoubtedly useful as they contributed to defining and making clear the research problems, questions, and dimensions of the research, which were questioned later in the online survey. The interviews served as the basis for preparation for conducting the quantitative data collection and obtaining some more experience and knowledge about the motives of part-time learners. Therefore, the experiences gained from the interviews

were used when carrying out the online questionnaire. Even though the main focus of the research was the analysis of quantitative data, we also highlighted some quotations from part-time learners to illustrate their attitudes towards taking part in higher education.

When analyzing the data we compared the part-time learners of the University of Debrecen and the College of Nyíregyháza in terms of their socio-cultural status, motivations and barriers to participation and the factors influencing their decisions to choose an institution. We also made a comparative case study in order to highlight the similarities and differences in the motives and barriers of Hungarian, Romanian and Ukrainian adult learners. We interviewed some part-time students of each of the five higher education institutions of the 'Partium' region. This dissertation is partly built on the experiences gained from these university visits and interviews.

The online questionnaires were conducted at five higher education institutions and part-time (adult)

learners were asked to participate in the research. The data collected from the questionnaires (n=1232) were analyzed using the SPSS 18.0 statistical program.

We applied descriptive statistics tests (such as frequency analysis, means etc.). In addition, we carried out hypothesis testing (such as crosstabs, t-tests, and analyses of variance), calculated correlations and performed factor analysis.

The reliability of the results of the current research is supported by the application of two additional research methods: first we compared the results of this research with the findings of the *Graduate Follow-up Project* (DPR) and *The role of higher education in social cohesion* research projects, and we compared the quantitative data with the qualitative data.

The dissertation composed of two parts. The theoretical part of the dissertation is about elaborating the theoretical framework; the empirical part is about testing our hypotheses.

The *Introduction* focuses on the goals, antecedents and the field ('Partium' region) of the research. *The interpretations of the key terms*, is a thorough examination of terminologies used in this dissertation and in previous studies. These key terms include the concepts of adult education, labor market training, recurrent training, permanent education, lifelong learning and the different types of adult higher education (correspondence, evening course and distance learning). We also examine the different interpretations of non-traditional learners, adult learners and part-time learners. Finally, we argue for using the term part-time learners.

In the chapter titled *Participation in higher education from a historical and statistical point of view*, we analyze the trends of participation in higher education based on educational statistics. Participation in higher education is first elaborated from a historical point of view in order to shed light on the trends, and secondly, the recent changes of participation in higher education are

explained in detail with a special focus on the numbers of part-time students in higher education. We briefly discuss the social history and demographic background of higher education expansion. Based on UNESCO and OECD statistics, we concisely analyze the expansion of higher education throughout the world and more specifically in Hungary. This part is followed by a detailed analysis of the numbers of full time, correspondence, evening course students as well as distance learners in Hungary. We focus on the changes in the numbers of full time and part time students in the selected Hungarian higher education institutions over the last ten years. At the end of this chapter, we summarize the possible explanations for the trends in higher education participation. We refer to demographic reasons, the Bologna-reform, changes related to the General Certificate of Education as well as some relevant legal changes concerning education.

The subsequent chapter, titled *Participation in higher education from a theoretical perspective*, is based on the

critical review of Hungarian and English literature on participation by summarizing the most important theories of participation in higher education. This review consists of three parts: first, we explain the reasons for participation; secondly, we focus on the barriers to participation in education; and finally, we present research on part-time learners' participation in higher education. The theoretical framework of the dissertation is based on several theoretical considerations, of which the most influential is the chain-of-response model developed by Patricia K. Cross. This model regards participation in education programs not as a linear process but rather as a prismatic process which is dependent on many interacting factors. Cross's model can be regarded as a synthesis of former theories, therefore, it can be viewed as one of the most significant theories in the field. This is true because many scholars cite the chain-of-response model on participation and even if researchers later improved the model, the main concept remained the same.

The empirical part of the dissertation departs from the comparative analyses of the part-time learners of the University of Debrecen and the College of Nyíregyháza. First, we present the socio-demographic socio-cultural features of the sample and the higher education study features of the respondents. We compare our results with the findings of other research projects such as those of the Hungarian (Veroszta) and the *Graduate Follow-Up Research* (DPR) at the University of Debrecen, (Engler, Fónai–Puskás–Szűcs, Fónai–Pusztai, Pusztai), *The higher education for social cohesion* (HERD) research (Engler), and finally the *Adult learners in higher education* research project (Engler). We also compare our results with the data of higher educational statistical yearbooks, and other research projects such as the ones led by Gábor Erdei and Hajnalka Fényes.

During quantitative analyses we calculated correlations and carried out factor analyses. The results of correlation calculations and factor analyses of the

motivations, barriers and choice of institutions are also elaborated in this chapter.

The part-time learners of Ukrainian and Romanian institutions are examined in the following chapter, which is basically a case study. Here we also start with the analyses of the respondents' socio-cultural background and higher education study features. Students in Ukraine, in Romania and in Hungary are compared in terms of the motivations and barriers to participation in education programs as well as the factors influencing them to attend a particular higher education institution.

In the closing chapter, *The summary of the main outcomes of the dissertation*, we summarize the main results of the dissertation and refer to further research prospectives.

III. Research findings

1. First of all, we wish to investigate whether adult learners' participation in higher education can mainly be explained by labor market reasons, or whether there are other reasons for participation. We identified the

following five motivational factors: *self-fulfillment*, *career aspiration*, *job-hunting*, *community experience* and *workplace expectations*. The most important motivational factor is the one that we call *self-fulfillment*. In other words, learning for one's own sake, due to interest in the subject and the desire to extend and improve one's knowledge. However, it is unquestionable that the second and third strongest motivational factors (*career aspirations* and *job-hunting factors*) are firmly related to labor market reasons which have undoubtedly practical and pragmatic purposes. Therefore, we can claim that both *self-fulfillment* and *job-related reasons* of participation contribute to part-time learners' motivation to study in higher education programs. It is worth noting that *self-fulfillment*, *community experience* and *job-hunting* factors are more important for women than for men.

2. In connection with the obstacles to participation, our hypothesis was that the most powerful deterrents to participation are the costs of education, the time

devoted to education and preparation for examinations. As a result of the factor analyses of deterrent factors, we identified six deterrent factors: *money* (costs of education), *learning* (preparation for the exams), *workplace* (workplace tasks), *family* (family responsibilities), *administration* (administration of studies) and *age* (perception of being old). Of these deterrent factors, the most influential is *money*; in other words, the costs of education are the most dominant barriers to participation. This was followed by the factors of *learning* and *workplace*. The family and the administrative barrier factors have been proven to be less influential. Surprisingly, age seems to play the least significant role in participation in higher education. Evidently, the most dominant barriers to the participation of Hungarian adult learners are tuition fee and the additional costs of education. Secondly, *learning* (attendance at courses, preparation for and taking exams) and *workplace* (working hours, responsibilities etc.) are second and third most important barriers to

participation. Thus, we can confirm our hypothesis that *money* and *time* are the most important obstacles to participation in higher education.

3. It was also assumed that the most important reasons for choosing a particular higher education institution and its program are the educational programs of the institutions (that is to say, whether a university or college offer a certain program that an adult want to study), the public opinion about the quality of the school or the program and the geographical distance of the institution from the learners' residence. We identified four factors influencing one's decision to apply for an institution. These institutional factors are: *acknowledgement*, *closeness*, *recommendation* and *image*. The term *acknowledgement* refers to the quality of the education program, the job market prospects after graduation and future employers' opinion about the quality and usefulness of these programs. The *recommendation* factor refers to the fact that part-time learners opt for a certain institution and program

because someone (such as family members, relatives, students or peers) recommended the institution and the major. The *closeness* factor not only refers to the geographical closeness of the institution but also the personal closeness, because for example the adult learners graduated there. The *image* factor refers to the image of the university or college. Of these four factors, the most powerful one is the *acknowledgement* of the institution. Besides this, the geographical and personal *closeness* of the institution are also influential. Therefore, we can confirm the hypothesis of the research, because what is important when opting for a higher education institution is the quality and acknowledgement of the university or college.

4. Finally, a further hypothesis was that there must be considerable differences among Hungarian, Romanian and Ukrainian part-time learners in terms of the students' motivations and barriers to participation as well as the reasons for opting for a certain higher education institution. As far as the motivational factors

are concerned, there are considerable differences among Hungarian, Romanian and Ukrainian adult learners. For example, students in Ukraine and Romania mainly study because they wish to get a job, whereas students in Hungary tend to study for the purpose of keeping their positions and building their carriers. The social factors of participation are more important for students in Ukraine and Romania than for students in Hungary. As for the barriers to participation, there are considerable differences between these three groups of students. For instance, family responsibilities are stronger obstacles of participation for student in the Ukraine and Romania. In contrast, workplace responsibilities are stronger barriers for students in Hungary. Time spent on education is also an important challenge for Hungarian, Romanian and Ukrainian part-time learners. The university and college students of all five institutions agreed that the most important factor of opting for an institution is the quality of the education program and the institution's acknowledgement.

Recommendation is also more influential for students in Romania and Ukraine. The costs of education are also more important for students abroad. The only factor which is more important for students in Hungarian institutions is previous higher education studies.

All in all, one of the most important outcomes of this research is that we managed to confirm that the major motivations are learning for one's own sake, professional interest in the subject to show that they can earn a degree and to obtain prestige. In other words, the major purpose of adult learning is *self-fulfillment*. However, it is undoubted that labor market reasons (such as job-hunting, getting promoted, higher salary, etc.) are also important drivers for completing higher education studies in adulthood. Secondly, we identified interesting differences among Hungarian, Romanian and Ukrainian adult learners in terms of their motivations and barriers to participation in higher education as well as the decisions concerning the choice of higher education institutions. It became clear that, within the

labor market motivational factors, the purposes of higher education studies for Hungarian part-time learners are to keep their jobs/positions and move on the career ladder, whereas Romanian and Ukrainian adult learners mainly study in order to get a job.



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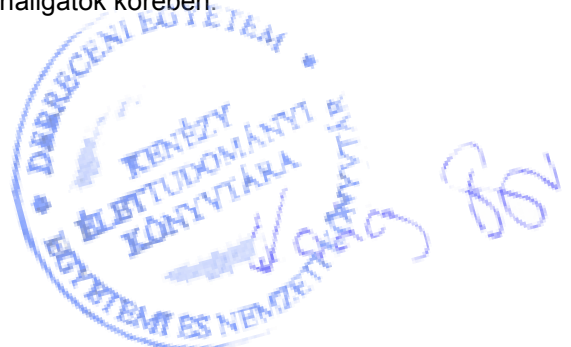
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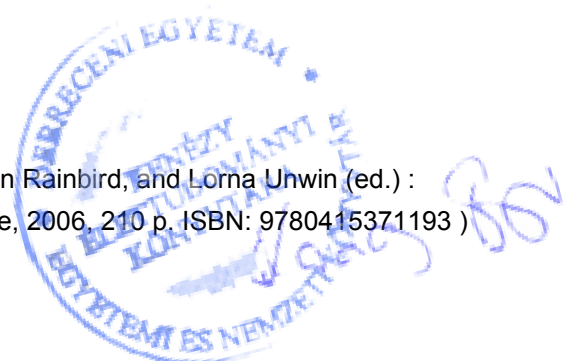
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Total IF of journals (all publications): 0

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