

Theses of PhD dissertation

**LOCAL IMPACTS OF SMALL TOWN HIGHER
EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN THE GREAT
HUNGARIAN PLAIN**

Ede Petrás

Consultant: Dr. Gabriella Pusztai PhD



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

Doctoral School of Humanities

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1. Purpose of the dissertation

The dissertation aimed at the analysis of the various local impacts of small town higher education institutions in the Great Hungarian Plain. The increasing actuality of the social mission of higher education, as well as its growing importance as a potential local resource for settlements facing the transformation of their traditional functions were among the main reasons of the choice of my research topic.

By my theoretical and empirical research, I intended to answer whether the development ambitions of the observed faculties were justified in the respect of their social mission or they were only manifestations of an assertive institutional demand for survival or growth.

I examined the realisation of the social mission of higher education within the framework of functional analysis of institutions, focusing on the impacts of institutions on their social environment as organisational responses to the demands of the society. In my dissertation, I used two of the possible approaches to functional analysis.

Economy of education is one them, in my view including not only the impacts of institutions on human development, but also their role in local development, economy and investments, according to its wider interpretation prevalent in the literature.

Ecology of education is the second approach applied. According to the theory of inter-generational transfer of capital, ecological approach can be considered as a long-term application of economical approach, the manifest and latent functions of universities and colleges being regarded as long return investments to the society.

I used the above approaches simultaneously in my dissertation, as social and economical impacts of institutions are interlocked at the local level. A complex, holistic viewpoint on a relatively small area is an advantage of the combination of approaches.

I considered schools offering at least bachelor programmes as higher education institutions, not including places of semi-tertiary education.

For field of the local functional analysis of higher education, I chose the type of small towns that constitute a special nature of social and economical environment. Due to the relatively great size of population of towns in the Great Hungarian Plain, many settlements of small town character and functions could be classified as middle towns. Having considered the regional peculiarities of the settlement network, I regarded all urban settlements as small towns, with the exception of county seats.

The Great Hungarian Plain constituted the spatial frames of my research. In my dissertation, the term of Great Plain was interpreted not so much as a geographical unit, rather as a relatively homogenous aggregation of various historical, geographical, social, economical and cultural phenomena, i. e. a 'syndrome' – in the phrase of Beluszky. Regarding my research topic, a peculiar structure of settlement network and urban functions is the most important element of the 'Great Plain syndrome', diverging from both the usual Hungarian and European standards. A special type of urban settlements, i. e. former market towns make up the ridge of the regional settlement network, most of them having long traditions of (peasant) embourgeoisement and education.

Functional analysis of higher education institutions has numerous antecedents in Hungarian social sciences – studies of Kozma and Nemes Nagy among others –, some aspects of my purpose and approaches have been, however, absent from the preceding scientific discourse. These novel features of my dissertation are the analysis of historical contiguities between urban development and education institutions, the concern on small town institutions and last but not least, the simultaneous application of economical and ecological approaches.

The dissertation was not expanded to a particular analysis of the quality of education at the observed institutions. This issue was examined only osculatory, by secondary analysis of national statistical data on higher education. Furthermore, my research did not cover the question of the students' economical benefits deriving from their institutions, as the favourable impacts of a local higher education supply on student career paths had been justified by previous empirical findings.

2. Research methods and database

According to several studies on methodological research of the last two decades, qualitative and quantitative methods are far not in an exclusive, but rather in a complementary relationship. Validity of empirical data deriving from these methods can mutually be justified one by the other. By a simultaneous application of both kinds of methods, a more complex interpretation can be achieved, and furthermore, researchers can avoid projecting their own presuppositions into the reality.

While the relatively small number and homogeneity of the lecturers at the higher education institutions observed sought for qualitative methods, qualitative methods were needed in regard both to the greater number of students and the demand for a comparative view of the institutions. Having considered the above mentioned methodological findings, and as a response to the demands posed by my research topic, I decided to use both kinds of methods simultaneously.

The observed institutions served as primary fields of the collection of empirical data, including document analysis, interviews with faculty leaders and lecturers, as well as a survey on the local embeddedness of students. Internal investigation was completed by a number of interviews with representants of some local organisations working at the field of the given institution.

Local economical impacts of the observed faculties were analysed by the input-output heuristic of Leontief, prevalent among institutional functional analyses. Regarding inputs, I focused on the role of faculties in creating jobs, abating migration and enhancing consumption, while among outputs, I examined the impacts on the development of human resource and economy, as well as the participation in urban development.

I separated three levels of ecological impacts by the nature of the presence of the faculties in their local societies. While the level of institutions involves the various manifest and latent impacts deriving from the faculties as a whole, the levels of lecturers and students present the issues of the social participation of individuals populating the institutions. Following a preliminary review upon these levels, five issues were analysed in-depth, playing essential role within the local ecological impacts of higher education institutions according to my empirical data. These key issues were the following: partnership with other institutions, traditions and events, impacts on parishes as the most extended civil communities, local political relations and finally, conflicts with the local society.

Collection of the empirical data was realised at four faculties of three towns, between autumn 2006 and spring 2007. The choice of the localities to be observed was determined by two primary considerations. On the one hand, I sought for towns preserving similar market town traditions so as to reflect the historical peculiarities of the region clearly, while on the other hand, I strove to choose towns representing different segments within the historical traditions of education in the Great Plain.

On the grounds of the above considerations, the following institutions constituted my empirical sample: Faculty of Agriculture, University of Szeged in Hódmezővásárhely, Faculty of Teacher Training, Károli Gáspár University in Nagykőrös, as well as Faculty of Agricultural, Water and Environmental Management and Faculty of Education, Szent István University (Tessedik Sámuel College at the time of my research) in Szarvas.

3. Findings of the dissertation

During my theoretical research, I explored the social context of the local impacts of small town higher education institutions in the Great Plain. Hungarian and international literature on urbanisation and local societies was reviewed and formed into a frame of interpretation, paying a particular regard to the studies on small towns in Hungary and urbanisation in the Great Plain. On the grounds of the findings of Amin, Bibó, Castells, Enyedi, Fukuyama, A. Gergely, Lefèbvre and other authors, I analysed the urbanisation, desurbanisation and reurbanisation processes going on since the beginning of the modern age. Having considered the scientific discourse concerning Hungarian small towns – principally the findings of Bánlaky, Kovách and Utasi –, I identified the different scientific interpretations of the nature of small town as a type of settlements, and moreover, I pointed out the middle class character of small town elites.

By the theses of historical urban studies – the findings of Beluszky, Benevolo and Erdei in particular –, I found the model of market towns in the Great Plain – though specific within Hungarian settlement network – to be strongly related to the antique type of European urbanisation surviving beside the mediaeval type dominant during the last millennium.

On the strength of the findings of Márkus, Rácz and other authors, I found local schooling networks sustained by parishes to have served as an intellectual background for the economical, cultural and political life of (peasant) embourgeoisment in the Great Plain since the 16th century. Community functions, meeting the tuition and cultural needs of inhabitants were primary demands towards the – mostly locally founded – Protestant education institutions. By the mid 20th century, Protestant schooling networks of Great Plain towns – including the Lutheran secondary schools of Slovak settlers migrating to the region – had reflected the market town model and values of local societies.

By the theoretical discourse on the continuity of market town model – studies of Juhász, Kovách, Szelényi and other authors –, I postulated that the present state of small towns in the Great Plain were determined by both their traditions of urbanisation and the socio-economical trends of the last century. A local development based on inner resources can be generated in this towns by the persistent elements of market town model – including those of Protestant schooling traditions –, potentially supporting reurbanisation which offers a kind of solution to the present crucial position of small towns in the Great Plain.

Partial continuity of the traditional functions of education can serve as one of the agents of the above process. By date, the social and cultural role of one-time Protestant schools are taken up less by their posterior secondary schools than higher education institutions. Therefore small town universities and colleges of the Great Plain are supposed to have notable impact on local migration trends. This favourable impact may serve as a compensation for traditional small town functions depreciating in the last two decades, as well as for the structural and regional inequalities of the schooling careers of youth revealed by Hungarian studies on the ecology of education (findings of Kozma and other authors).

Having taken the above prospects into consideration, I claimed small town higher education institutions of the Great Plain to become intellectual hubs and initiators of innovation within their localities potentially. This is, however, just an opportunity, and its realisation is influenced by various factors.

By a review of the history of higher education in the Great Plain, I found that the present network had been shaped during the second half of the 20th century. By the Soviet interpretation of dual system, the type of specialised college became prevalent. According to the statistical analysis of Nemes Nagy on a database from 1973, small town colleges of the Great Plain offered great opportunity of mobility and equality of chance. However, these strong points were accompanied by a narrow profile dominated traditionally by the fields of education and agriculture. This structural weakness has not decreased significantly by now, in spite of the expansion of higher education throughout the last two decades.

On the grounds of the findings of Barakonyi, Kozma and Pusztai and Szabó, I demonstrated that some elements of the Hungarian adaptation of the Bologna Process contradict to the common initiative for a transparent, convertible and – also globally – competitive European Higher Education Area. Reduction of faculty autonomies, cutback of headcounts, application of quality assurance as a means of government control rather than self-supervision of the institutions, as well as the ad hoc, manual direction of the whole process are such Hungarian peculiarities.

By a secondary analysis of contemporary statistical data on higher education in Hungary, I found that the number of students per lecturer was more favourable at small town institutions of the Great Plain, than at both the institutions of similar profile in Hungary and those located in Great Plain county seats. Regarding qualified lecturers, the above advantage was still perceptible – especially at the faculties of education –, though not so characteristic as it had been at the first case. Having considered the results of National Scientific Student's Conferences, I concluded that small town faculties of education in the Great Plain had

prominent quality in comparison to both regional and national average, while faculties of agriculture representing the other traditional profile of the region, converge at this dimension to the average national level of agricultural education. My analysis proving competitiveness of small town institutions with other segments of Hungarian higher education was affirmed by a further empirical finding of a number of studies claiming the favourable impacts of a local higher education supply on student careers.

The present conditions of small town higher education institutions of the Great Plain have been determined by several historical, social, economical and political factors. To interpret them relying on the glonacal heuristic of Marginson and Rhoades, these factors comprise global, national and local agents and trends in the same time. Challenged by such agents as the Bologna Process, the gradual shrinkage of public finance, or the demand for (also) locally marketable programmes in a long-term, small town institutions must re-interpret their position within the network of higher education, finding a new role in place of the model of specialised college.

I delineated four different scenarios for the realisation of the above demand. At the reality of the various institutions, a certain combination of them are followed. These scenarios include the preservation or creation of local peculiarities, the evolution into university status, the evolution towards vocational school and last but not least, the formation of partnership networks between different institutions.

The empirical findings of my dissertation are demonstrated by the following paragraphs, sorted around the eight hypotheses of my research.

The first, overall hypothesis of my research was that small town higher education institutions of the Great Plain had favourable impacts on local life and development. In accordance with my assumption, numerous local impacts were detected at each observed faculty. I further found institutional impacts to be significant both from the economical and ecological approaches, while presence of students resulted mainly at economical and ecological impacts, contrary to lecturers having mostly ecological ones.

The hypothesis about the size of institutions having great influence on economical impacts was supported partly, only at the case of inputs. The case of Szarvas faculties attested that higher education institutions of a suitable size and range of programmes were potential key agents of the local economy. On the contrary, the Hódmezővásárhely case showed that outputs were determined rather by such factors as the proportion of local students and lecturers, the structure of the local economy and the willingness to partnership between faculty leaders and local authorities, rather than the size of institutions.

My hypothesis concerning the favourable economical, touristical and demographical impacts of the presence of students was proven just slightly, restricted to a few sectors. Contrary to my assumption, students play minimal role as a source of immigration, due to the low level of local demand for the qualifications educated at the faculties. Nevertheless, the Szarvas case confirmed that a number of local ventures were capable to attain considerable share at students' consumption, even against the concurrency of great supply chains from outside the local economy.

According to the fourth hypothesis, output economical impacts of the observed institutions were limited by the crucial conditions of the economy of the Great Plain and the stable financial problems of higher education. In spite of my assumption, the above factors had an adverse effect particularly on ecological impacts, while economical ones were limited by the unfavourable economical structure of the towns and the lack or conflicts of local informal relations, rather than the present poor state of regional economy and institutional finances.

My hypothesis about agriculture faculties having greater impact on local economies than pedagogical ones was supported by my observations. An explanation for this difference is that the profile of agriculture faculties is closer to the manufacturer sector, while another reason comes from the multiple relationship between the faculties and actors of the local economy, rooted on the socialist agriculture.

The hypothesis concerning the strong correlation of ecological impacts with the residence of lecturers and students was just partly proven by my research. Although the high proportion of the local proved to a key factor by the case of Hódmezővásárhely, I also observed numerous ecological impacts at the rest of the faculties, having a wider enrolment and employment area.

Notwithstanding my seventh hypothesis, local impacts of the faculties were just slightly influenced by the adverse political background and the ambiguous conditions of higher education, these factors being harmful rather to the spirit and inner world of the institutions, as well as to the quality of their education.

Finally, the hypothesis proved to be appropriate about the existence of an extensive partnership between the faculties and local social, cultural and political institutions – as an enduring element of the market town model of urban development –, serving as scenes of public and community acting by the local elites. Examples of partnership with social and cultural institutions were observed particularly in the case of the pedagogical faculties, while

the Hódmezővásárhely case indicated an intensive cooperation with the local authority in the field of urban development.

A general negative experience of my empirical research, potentially relevant for small towns possessing higher education, was the lack of small town institutions having significant input and output impacts on the local economy at the same time. While inputs are determined by the number of students and the range of programmes, outputs are relatively independent from the size of institutions, being influenced rather by their cooperation potential with local economical and political actors.

Beside numerous factors, a reason for the above negative experience is that the Soviet fashioned model of specialised colleges, still prevalent in the higher education of small towns in the Great Plain, is less suitable for fulfilling a social mission. According to my thesis, either becoming university or evolving towards community college would be more suitable for the development of both the faculties and their environment.

Beyond educational researchers, my observation about actual development strategies tending to the evolution to university status is remarkable to both higher education planning and the managements of small town universities and colleges. On the grounds of the British higher education reforms of the 1990s, realisation of the above ambitions can be expected to result in a long-term development of both the affected institutions and the Hungarian higher education network as a whole.

A further finding of my dissertation is also noteworthy to rural development experts. In the case of the institutions of those small towns situated at a longer distance to the great innovation centres of the Great Plain, namely, a development strategy containing some elements of community college model seems more realistic than evolution to university status. This kind of development could result in two great advantages for the towns and their environs. On the one hand, chance of participation in higher education would increase significantly for the youth of peripheral areas, while on the other hand, notable local innovative capacities could be created by higher education institutions having continuous relations to the actors of local economies, responding their demands flexibly.

In my opinion, both strategies have a role within the – relatively advanced – higher education network of the Great Plain. In the respect of both the social mission and the competitiveness of the higher education network as a whole, the simultaneous adaptation of both strategies – paying of course a great regard to local economical, social and institutional conditions – would be the most favourable scenario.

The scientific findings of my dissertation can be further affirmed and extended by additional empirical research to be realised in the close future. Quest of the career paths of graduated students, as well as analysis of the mental image of local societies on higher education institutions are among the possible orientations of further research. Beyond the above considerations, research on adult education as – an existing or potential – local resource, though exceeds the frames of my topic, constitutes an issue inseparable from the impact of higher education in small town areas distant from the great hubs of innovation.

4. Publications of the author on the topic of the dissertation

Chapters and articles

A kisvárosi főiskolák helyi kulturális hatása – teória és realitás [Local cultural impact of small town colleges – theory and reality] (2009).

In Jancsák Cs. (ed): Fiatalok a Kárpát-medencében: Mozaikok az ifjúság világáról. Szeged: Belvedere, 80-93.

Az önkormányzatok és a felsőoktatási intézmények partnerségének lehetséges formái a kisvárosok fejlesztésében [Possible Ways of Partnership Between Self-Governments and Higher Education Institutions for the Development of Small Towns] (2008).

In Buday-Sántha A. et al (eds): Önkormányzatok gazdálkodása – helyi fejlesztés. Pécs: University of Pécs, 356-362.

A kisvárosi főiskolák hallgatóinak társadalmi helyzete és életmódja [Social Status and Lifestyle of Small Town College Students] (2007).

Tér és Társadalom, 21 (4): 111-129.

Intézmény és lokalitás: a kisvárosi főiskolák helyi társadalomformáló hatása [Institution and locality: The impact of small town colleges on local communities] (2006).

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Lokalizáció: globális alternatíva? [Localisation: A global alternative?] (2006)

In Molnár B.-Szerepi S. (eds): Globalizációs ismeretek. Hajdúböszörmény: Galenos, 44-71.

A felsőfokú szakképzések települési beágyazottsága [Local embeddedness of post-secondary education institutions] (2005).

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Lokalizáció és lokális identitás a globalizáció korában [Localisation and Local Identity in the Age of Globalisation] (2005).

Szociológiai Szemle, 15 (4): 85-98.

Online articles

A kisvárosi főiskolák településfejlesztő szerepe: a gyulai eset [The Impact of Small Town Colleges on Local Development: The Gyula Case] (2007).

<http://www.alfoldinfo.hu/kisvaros/kisvaros.mht>

The Contribution of Former Market Towns to Regional Development (2006).

http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/conferences/od2006/doc/articles/petras_article.doc

5. Further publications of the author

Articles

Fönntartható-e a tanyai településforma? Családi gazdaságok a kiskunhalasi tanyavilágban [Are Scattered Farms Sustainable? Family Farms in Kiskunhalas Area] (2006).

In Madarász B.-Kovács A. (eds.): III. Magyar Földrajzi Konferencia tudományos közleményei. CD kötet. Budapest: MTA FKI. 9 o.

A homokhátsági tanyák népesedési adatai és társadalmának néhány jellemzője [Some Demographical and Social Data on the Scattered Farms of Sand Ridge] (2006).

A Falu, 21 (2): 63-70.

Erdély peremén: válsághelyzet és szóróvándorlás Hunyad megyében [At the Edge of Transylvania: Crisis and Hungarian Diaspores in Hunedoara County, Roumania] (2004).

Protestáns Szemle, 13 (1): 1-17.

Recensions

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Tér és Társadalom, 22 (1): 241-243.

Horváth Dezső: A fölfedezettlen Magyarország [Dezső Horváth: Hungary Unfolded] (2006).

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