

Book Review

## Academic life in shade and light: Snapshots of well-being

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### Introduction

Over the past few decades, changes in higher education have transformed the work of those pursuing academic careers. The increase in student numbers has broadened their roles: in addition to their teaching and research activities, they now also must deal with grant applications and coordination, mentoring, helping students catch up, and motivating those who are falling behind. At the same time, the managerial approach that is gaining ground in higher education institutions and the internationalization of education and research have further shaped the work of teachers. However, the expectations associated with their various roles and activities place great pressure on academic staff, which can be a significant source of stress in their lives. This can not only have a negative impact on their health and well-being but can also determine their job satisfaction and performance (Kovács & Pallay, 2024, Pallay et al., 2024). These changes have led to the publication of a volume edited by Gabriella Pusztai and Klára Kovács, which examines the well-being of academic staff in the rapidly changing higher education systems of five Central and Eastern European countries (Hungary, Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, and Serbia) that share common historical roots.

The editors of this volume are recognized, leading figures in the academic community. One of the editors, Prof. Dr. Gabriella Pusztai, is the director of the Institute of Education Science, the head of the Doctoral School of Humanities and the Center for Higher Education Research and Development (CHERD-Hungary) at the University of Debrecen, where she also serves as a senior researcher. Her work focuses on the fields of education and sociology. Among her main research areas, the cultural and social capital resources underlying student and school performance, as well as the examination of the educational trajectories of religious and national minorities, are particularly noteworthy. Her outstanding professional expertise serves as a guiding compass in academic discourse and within the CHERD-H research group; through her active research, she continuously shapes and develops the field (Pusztai et al., 2025, Pusztai et al., 2025, Pusztai et al., 2024, Pusztai et al., 2022).

The other editor of the volume, Dr. habil. Klára Kovács-Nagy is a habilitated associate professor at the Institute of Education and Cultural Studies at the University of Debrecen and a senior researcher at the Center for Higher Education Research and Development. Her research focuses on examining the social, institutional, and individual factors that determine the sports habits of students in the Carpathian Basin (Kovács & Pusztai, 2024). In addition, he examines the impact of physical activity on well-being, health behaviors, and academic performance (Kovács et al., 2025). The results of his dedicated research work also form the basis of this volume, which is based on the study titled *Central and Eastern European Teachers in Higher Education (CEETHE)*, which he coordinated as principal investigator.

### Review

The volume can be placed in a series of books on higher education research that discuss the challenges faced by those working in higher education. At the same time, the volume in our hands not only discusses the well-

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known challenges affecting higher education, but also new challenges affecting the work of teachers and researchers, which is one of the important novelties of the volume. It puts these new challenges into a timely perspective by analyzing the impact of managerial values and practices on various dimensions of organizational commitment and employee well-being. This volume is the result of high-quality collaborative work conducted by lecturers and former doctoral students at the University of Debrecen's Institute of Education and Cultural Studies, together with researchers who are members of the CHERD-Hungary research group from Hungary and abroad. This collaborative effort is based on data from a qualitative and quantitative survey conducted as part of an international research project (CEETHE 2023), which examined the well-being, working conditions, and performance of academics in the five participating countries.

The editors introduce the publication by outlining the challenges facing higher education and the situation in the Central and Eastern European region. They then provide an overview of the research methodology, and the volume is subsequently structured into two main chapters. The first chapter presents the five countries studied from a comparative perspective, while the second chapter examines the background and effectiveness of teachers' work through empirical studies. In the first chapter, the five comparative studies analyzed the main higher education statistics and the legal environment of education policy in each country. In their analysis, the authors used descriptive and comparative statistical analysis methods, facilitating the interpretation of the data with comparative diagrams and tables.

The first paper, in the first chapter examines university teaching staff in Hungary. The analysis guides the reader through the development of the higher education system after the change of regime, and then presents some characteristics of academics (e.g., age, gender) in an international comparison. The second study provides an insight into the higher education system in Slovakia providing evidence of the impact of the post-communist system on current trends in higher education by analyzing the current situation of academic staff. The study also discusses current challenges such as the integration of students with special educational needs and the need for more inclusive higher education. The third study in this chapter focuses on the Romanian higher education system, where the focus is on the development of higher education and the status of academic staff in the post-communist period. The aim of the analysis is to identify the prevailing trends and to explore the international and national social, economic, and political factors that have driven these changes. The study on the Romanian higher education system is followed by the fourth study on Serbian higher education, which finds that Serbia's higher education system has been significantly transformed by reforms in higher education, and that these changes have intensified since the 2005 Bologna reforms. According to the authors, the reforms were aimed at successful integration into the European Higher Education Area, but the problem of achieving full integration remains, and their effectiveness in terms of the quality of education is also debatable. The study fills a gap by examining the impact of regulations on the appointment and employment status of academics. The last study in the first chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the higher education system in Ukraine, examining the modernization and restructuring of higher education in the period following the transition and Ukraine's independence.

The second chapter comprises six empirical studies that, as noted above, examine the well-being, working conditions, and effectiveness of academics. The first study in this chapter is structured around the concepts of educational effectiveness, institutional culture, and performance evaluation systems. The most important finding of the research is that the introduction of performance evaluation systems has different effects on teachers in different institutional culture. The second study focuses on examining the well-being of academics. According to the results of this research, time- and energy-intensive pedagogical activities do not negatively affect the well-being of academics. Another important finding of the study is that pedagogical activities can only be carried out effectively when academics have a high level of well-being. The third study also made interesting findings regarding the factors that limit and encourage the international mobility of academic staff. An important finding of their research is that academics' mobility varies between fields of study, with academics in the medical and healthcare academics staff being less mobile. Demographics, gender and age are also key determinants of international mobility. The next study examines the factors influencing the research productivity of teachers, based on the job demands-resources model. An important finding of the research is that older men in higher positions, those with academic degrees, those working in the social and economic sciences, and senior academics are the most productive.

In contrast, the results of the fifth study, which focused on work-life conflict, show that more than one-third of those working in academia feel that their personal needs are pushed into the background due of their work, and a third report that they even sacrifice their private lives. Based on cluster analysis, the final study, which examines the cultural consumption habits of academics, concludes that the cultural consumption patterns

of Central and Eastern European academics are similarly positive to those of culturally passive and culturally diverse elite groups.

### Conclusion

The volume entitled *Well-Being of Academic Staff in Rapidly Changing Higher Education* reflects on both past and present challenges. Its main value lies in the fact that it not only presents the changes that have taken place in the past but also reflects on the current challenges of academic work in higher education. The volume provides an opportunity for an international audience to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges experienced in the region and the diversity of academic work in higher education. At the same time, it highlights that an academic career today requires meeting institutional expectations and international performance standards while maintaining a significant balance between work and private life, which substantially shapes the well-being, mental health, and performance of academics.

We recommend the studies in this volume to all academics, and those working in higher education who would like to gain a deeper insight into the background of everyday challenges in higher education and are looking for practical suggestions for overcoming them. In addition, we recommend this volume to policymakers responsible for higher education, institutional and department leaders, and researchers working in this field, so that the higher education research presented in this volume can contribute to the necessary reforms to ensure that teachers can work and create in safe, inspiring, autonomous, relatively stress-free, and healthy conditions.

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