

Research Paper

The role of higher education socialization in shaping students' future-oriented work ethic

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Abstract

Research on higher education clearly indicates that the institutional environment, as well as the relationships formed with faculty and peers, not only influence academic achievement and the risk of dropout, but also have a significant long-term effect on students' life trajectories, future outlook, future orientation, and even their decisions to remain in a given geographic location (Pusztai, 2011; Bess & Dee, 2012; Sütő, 2021; Sütő, 2025; Demeter-Karászi, 2025). This suggests that higher education institutions do not operate merely as knowledge-transfer organizations, but also as socializing environments that shape students' relationship with work, achievement, and long-term goals. The theoretical framework of our research is therefore grounded in approaches that interpret future-oriented work ethic not exclusively as an individual psychological trait, but as a phenomenon embedded in social relationships and institutional contexts (Berger, 2001; Kuh & Umbach, 2004). Our research seeks to answer what associations can be identified between the characteristics of the social and institutional environment of higher education institutions — in particular, institutional culture, relationships with faculty and peers, and institutional trust — and students' future-oriented work ethic. Our empirical data are drawn from the 2023–2024 survey of the MTA–DE Public Education Development Research Program, a large-scale international database comprising 1,336 respondents. The results indicate that trust-based relationships with both faculty and peers, as well as the perception of a transparent and fair institutional atmosphere, are significantly associated with higher levels of future-oriented work ethic, with perceived supportive institutional culture emerging as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.252$; $p < 0.001$). It is particularly noteworthy that the effect of institutional and relational factors persisted even after controlling for social background variables. Our findings thereby corroborate the theoretical stance that future-oriented work ethic is not solely derived from individual attributes, but can be understood as an orientation shaped during higher education socialization through institutional and social environments. This is an especially important finding in light of the growing heterogeneity of the student body, as it suggests that a supportive institutional culture may contribute to strengthening the future orientation and long-term academic success of students from diverse social backgrounds.

Keywords: future-oriented work ethic; institutional culture; intergenerational relationships; intragenerational relationships; higher education

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Introduction

Research on higher education increasingly emphasizes that the institutional environment does not merely function as a knowledge-transfer mechanism, but also constitutes a socializing space in which students' life trajectories, future outlook, and future orientation are formed (Pusztai, 2011; Bess & Dee, 2012; Sütő, 2021; Sütő, 2025; Demeter-Karászi, 2025). This orientation-shaping function is particularly important in the context of the growing heterogeneity of the student body, since for students from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, the higher education institution may represent the first organized socializing environment that conveys and reinforces future-conscious behaviour and long-term goal pursuit as values (Ceglédi, 2018). Consequently, the study of students' future orientation and work ethic cannot be separated from the social and institutional influences that affect young people during higher education socialization.

The theoretical framework of our research is grounded in approaches that interpret future-oriented work ethic not exclusively as an individual psychological trait, but as a phenomenon embedded in social relationships and institutional contexts (Berger, 2001; Kuh & Umbach, 2004). In our empirical study, we seek to answer what associations can be identified between the characteristics of the social and institutional environment of higher education institutions — in particular, institutional culture, relationships with faculty and peers, and institutional trust — and students' future-oriented work ethic (Pusztai, 2026).

Theoretical Background

Institutions are complex organizations operating in diverse and continuously evolving social, economic, and political environments. Initially tasked with educating elite leaders, their mission gradually expanded, and they became the primary channels of economic and social mobility for all segments of society. Today, higher education institutions are not only sites of education, but also socializing environments for lifelong learning, community engagement, and personal fulfilment, while simultaneously shaping students' relationship with work, achievement, and long-term goals, as well as their future-oriented aspirations and work-related orientations (Bess & Dee, 2012; Pusztai, 2011; Sütő, 2011; Ceglédi, 2018; Demeter-Karászi, 2025). On this basis, it is reasonable to assume that these institutions may also influence students' future-oriented aspirations and their orientations toward work and achievement (Ceglédi, 2018). The orientation-shaping role of higher education institutions, however, does not operate solely at the level of institutional structures and declared values, but also manifests in the everyday social interactions and relational networks that constitute a defining part of students' lived experience. Consequently, the development of students' future orientation and relationship with work is closely linked to how individuals connect with the institutional community and what social experiences they acquire.

During student socialization in higher education, members of the new generation are not only interpretable as individual competitors, but also as individuals who are not passive recipients — they actively seek new connections, and for whom integration into the institution's social world and among their peers is of primary importance (Pusztai, 2011; Demeter-Karászi, 2025). The periodic re-examination and reconstruction of this phenomenon becomes important because the composition and circumstances of the student body undergo constant change. The outcome of the socialization process is a sense of belonging to the group, shaped by the influences that the institution exerts on the individual (Bocsi, 2022). Intra- and intergenerational relationships, as well as the set of norms and values, can be identified as such influences. Faculty and peer relationships may strengthen an individual's attachment to the institution, but may equally distance them from it through their adverse effects. Norms and values also establish a certain connection to the institutional community and culture, which the individual is able to engage with insofar as they accept the shared system of beliefs, norms, and the institution's traditions (Bocsi, 2022; Demeter-Karászi, 2025).

Among intergenerational relationships, the relationship between students and faculty proves to be particularly significant during student socialization. For a long time, the faculty role was characterized by one-way communication from the instructor, with little or no student-initiated communication — which was largely limited to academic matters. Today, the faculty relationship is recognized as an outstanding influencing factor in student socialization (Pusztai, 2011). As Pusztai states, "the conflicts arising from the heterogeneity of higher education's social world and the value pluralism of academic life open up space for a new type of faculty role" (Pusztai, 2010, p. 50). The relationship with administrative staff can also be interpreted as an intergenerational relationship. The influence of administrative employees is most apparent in guiding students in how to fulfil their role in higher education (Pusztai, 2011), and in providing information when students encounter obstacles

in their studies. Although their presence is found in every institution, the way they communicate conveys the institutional culture (Demeter-Karászi, 2025).

Alongside intergenerational relationships, intragenerational relationships also prove to be significant. Some perspectives emphasize the social relationship and environment as the primary influencing factor in student socialization, with peer interactions being particularly important (Pusztai, 2011). This influence can be distinguished according to the social environment from which the student comes — such as the family or memberships outside the institution — and the environment they join upon entering higher education (Pusztai, 2011). It can be stated that every influence, whether from the institution itself or from internal and external organizational memberships, affects the socialization of students present in higher education (Demeter-Karászi, 2025).

Through these means, these relational dimensions can be clearly linked to the formation and maintenance of future-oriented work ethic. Future-oriented work ethic cannot be regarded solely as an individual character trait interpretable in isolation, but is rather context-dependent, a phenomenon strongly influenced by institutional and social environments (Berger, 2001). Numerous studies report that among empirically supported institutional practices that reduce dropout and strengthen future-oriented work ethic is the development of an institutional culture that facilitates social interaction among individuals and contributes to the formation and maintenance of inter- and intragenerational relationships (Berger, 2001; Kuh & Umbach, 2004; Kuh, 2001; Demeter-Karászi, 2025).

There has been growing interest in the study of future-oriented aspirations and work- and achievement-related orientations in the international literature over recent decades, driven by rapidly changing social, economic, and labour market environments, as well as the diverse challenges facing the future outlook of younger generations. A defining common feature of theoretical and empirical approaches to future orientation is that they interpret it not as a one-dimensional phenomenon, but as a combination of cognitive and behavioural components. It encompasses not only future-directed thinking and planning, but also the goal-oriented and persistent action that follows, through which the individual actively participates in shaping their own future (Nurmi, 1991; Ahvenharju et al., 2018).

One defining, operationalizable dimension of future orientation is future-oriented work ethic, which expresses the extent to which an individual is able and willing to organize and sustain their daily efforts in line with long-term goals. The concept of future-oriented work ethic is applied in this study as an operationalized dimension of future orientation, drawing on the theoretical framework of the MTA–DE Public Education Development Research Program and the relevant international literature; its theoretical grounding builds on the concept of future orientation described above. In higher education contexts, this dimension is of particular importance, as this phase of students' life course is one in which the connection between educational investment and future labour market position may become conscious, and in which patterns of relating to work and achievement consolidate into more lasting orientations. Future-oriented work ethic is therefore linked not only to academic achievement, but also to post-graduation career trajectories, labour market integration, and long-term professional commitment (Pusztai, 2026).

Our hypotheses were formulated on the basis of prior theoretical models.

- H1: A supportive institutional culture shows a positive association with students' future-oriented work ethic, as such an institutional environment contributes to commitment to long-term goals through its norm-conveying function (Berger, 2001; Kuh & Umbach, 2004).
- H2: The quality of intergenerational relationships with faculty shows a positive association with students' future-oriented work ethic, as the personal attention and professional guidance of the instructor exerts a defining socializing influence in terms of goal-setting and persistence (Pusztai, 2011).
- H3: The presence and depth of intragenerational relationships with fellow students shows a positive association with students' future-oriented work ethic, as academically and future-oriented interactions among peers reinforce norms and values related to achievement (Pusztai, 2011; Bocsi, 2022).
- H4: Given the social heterogeneity of the student composition at the institutions studied, it is assumed that social background exerts an independent explanatory power in shaping future-oriented work ethic.

Materials and Methods

Our analysis is based on a large-scale student questionnaire survey conducted during the 2023/2024 academic year (N=1336). The research covered students at Hungarian-language higher education institutions operating on the eastern periphery of the European Higher Education Area. Data collection took place at higher education institutions in the eastern region of Hungary, as well as at Hungarian-language higher education institutions in

areas populated by Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries of Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, and Ukraine.

The study involved a total of ten institutions. Hungarian institutions included the University of Debrecen, the Debrecen Reformed Theological University, and Nyíregyháza University. Participating institutions from across the border included Babeş-Bolyai University, the Transylvanian Hungarian University of Arts, Partium Christian University, the Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College, the Hungarian Language Teacher Training Faculty of the University of Novi Sad, the University of Prešov, and Selye János University. Individual quota sampling was applied at Hungarian higher education institutions, while cluster sampling was used for data collection at cross-border institutions (Pusztai, 2026).

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 31 statistical software. The analysis employed descriptive statistics, as well as chi-square tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine whether significant differences could be identified between student groups. Linear regression analysis was also used to investigate which factors, and to what extent, contribute to shaping future-oriented work ethic. The regression model also allowed for conditional effects between variables to be taken into account when interpreting the results.

Measures

Dependent Variable: Future-Oriented Work Ethic (FOWE)

In interpreting the concept of future-oriented work ethic in our analysis, we draw on the theoretical and empirical approach of the MTA–DE Public Education Development Research Program. The research group employed items from several measurement instruments — eight in total — to measure students' future-oriented work ethic. The first four items are drawn from the Grit Scale Perseverance of Effort subscale and include statements such as: "I finish whatever I begin", "Setbacks don't discourage me", "I work hard", and "I am diligent" (Duckworth et al., 2007). The remaining four items come from the Work Ethic Scale by Have and Jehoel-Gijsbers, which measures various dimensions of one's relationship with work, perseverance, and performance-oriented attitudes. These include the statements: "I feel happiest after working hard"; "If people want to enjoy life, they must also be prepared to work hard for it"; "Work must always come first, even if this means less leisure time"; and "A person should not do what they want until they have done their duty" (Leenders et al., 2017).

Our measure therefore focuses on the behavioural component of future orientation — specifically on how the individual maintains their commitment to long-term goals through disciplined, normatively grounded, and persistent behaviour in the face of obstacles. The Research Group refers to this instrument as future-oriented work ethic (FOWE) (Pusztai, 2026).

In our analysis, future-oriented work ethic is represented by a principal component transformed to a 0–100 scale by Kovács. The Cronbach's alpha value of the full scale was 0.739; the KMO value of the principal component was 0.791, $p < 0.001$, and the explained variance was 55.06%. The principal component includes the following items with their loadings: (1) I work hard — 0.691; (2) I feel happiest after working hard — 0.690; (3) I am diligent — 0.679; (4) I finish whatever I begin — 0.614; (5) If people want to enjoy life, they must also be prepared to work hard for it — 0.593; (6) Work must always come first, even if this means less leisure time — 0.571; (7) A person should not do what they want until they have done their duty — 0.563; (8) Setbacks don't discourage me — 0.531 (Kovács, 2026; Miklódi-Simon & Kovács, 2026; Pusztai, 2026)Pusztai, 2026).

Independent Variables

Institutional Factors

In our empirical analysis, we developed measures to assess the relationship and influence of higher education institutional factors — specifically institutional culture and inter- and intragenerational relationships. The relevant items from the questionnaire were used to construct these variables.

The quality of faculty relationships and negative experiences related to institutional functioning were captured using three items. These items asked respondents to what extent they experienced a lack of information, faculty misconduct, or a lack of assistance from fellow students during their higher education studies. A separate variable group was developed to measure trust in the institution, assessing the level of trust in various institutional actors and organizational units. This question block addressed trust in the university or

college leadership, faculty leadership, administrative staff, the majority of teaching staff, fellow students, and student council representatives.

In examining intergenerational relationships with faculty, items were included that captured various dimensions of out-of-class relationships with instructors. Questions focused on whether students had a faculty member with whom they discussed academic questions, public affairs, future plans, or personal problems, as well as whether they maintained regular email contact with any instructor, or whether any instructor personally followed their career. Intragenerational relationships were measured using items examining various forms of relationships with fellow students. The question block included relational dimensions such as discussing academic and personal problems, studying together, sharing plans for the future, conversing about academic or public affairs topics, and leisure and sports activities.

A seven-item variable group was used to measure perceived institutional culture. Questions addressed the family-like character of the institutional environment, supportive relationships between students and faculty, development-oriented functioning, a competitive spirit and performance orientation, rule compliance, transparency of information flow, and fair treatment of students. All variables included in the analysis were operationalized as composite index variables constructed from multiple items.

Sociocultural Factors

In operationalizing students' sociocultural characteristics, the analysis included variables related to minority status, family structure, parents' educational attainment and employment status, type of place of residence, and respondents' subjective financial situation.

Results

As a first step, bivariate analyses were conducted to examine the associations between variables related to institutional culture, inter- and intragenerational relationships, and future-oriented work ethic. The results showed that the large majority of the items examined were significantly associated with future-oriented work ethic, revealing several clearly discernible patterns.

With respect to variables related to institutional functioning and trust, higher future-oriented work ethic was found among students who did not experience a lack of information during their higher education studies, and who perceived that faculty treated them fairly. A close association was also observed between institutional trust and future-oriented work ethic: students who placed greater trust in their institution's and faculty's leadership, administrative staff, instructors, and fellow students tended to have higher levels of future-oriented work ethic. The results suggest that transparent and predictable institutional functioning, as well as a climate of trust, play an important role in shaping students' long-term goal orientation and persistence. However, the absence of assistance from fellow students showed no significant association with the indicator examined.

The analysis of intergenerational relationships with university faculty also revealed marked associations. In general, students who had at least one instructor with whom they conversed on various topics outside of class demonstrated higher future-oriented work ethic, and this value increased further among those with multiple such faculty relationships. Particularly strong associations emerged for items capturing interactions focused on students' future and career trajectories. Students who had an instructor with whom they discussed their future plans, or who felt that an instructor personally paid attention to their career, had significantly higher levels of future-oriented work ethic. The results suggest that the supportive, mentoring role of instructors may be of outstanding importance in reinforcing students' long-term goal orientation and persistence. In contrast, informal conversation topics such as art or sport and healthy living showed no significant association with the indicator examined.

A similar pattern was observed for intragenerational relationships with fellow students. Even the presence of a single trusting or supportive peer relationship was associated with higher future-oriented work ethic, while having multiple such relationships was generally associated with even more favourable values. Particularly important were those relationships that facilitated communication about academic matters, future plans, or academic topics. Students who had peer relationships in which they could discuss academic problems, future plans, or academic questions had higher future-oriented work ethic. An interesting pattern emerged, however, in the case of personal problems and illness: in these more sensitive life situations, the presence of a single close, trusting relationship proved most favourable. It is assumed that in such situations, students tend to rely on a few closer, trust-based relationships. Among peer relationships, spending leisure time together and conversations about art showed no significant association with future-oriented work ethic.

Analysis of the items measuring institutional culture consistently indicated strong and significant associations with future-oriented work ethic. Students who perceived their institution as family-like, characterized by a supportive atmosphere, development-oriented, performance-focused, and operating fairly showed higher future-oriented work ethic. Particularly important proved to be the perception of transparency of institutional functioning, appropriate information flow, and fair and consistent treatment. Overall, the results suggest that a supportive and predictable institutional culture may play a significant role in shaping students' long-term goal orientation, persistence, and relationship with achievement.

In the next step of the analysis, two-step linear regression was used to examine the associations between higher education institutional culture and inter- and intragenerational relationships and future-oriented work ethic. The first model included variables related to higher education institutional culture and inter- and intragenerational relationships. In the second step, the model was supplemented with the previously analyzed social background variables. The model constructed with institutional culture and inter- and intragenerational relationships showed significant explanatory power ($F(6,1092)=27.889$; $p<0.001$), explaining 12.8% of the variance in future-oriented work ethic. With the inclusion of social background variables, the model's explanatory power increased to 14.4% ($F(16,1082)=12.589$; $p<0.001$).

According to the results of the first linear regression model, all variables capturing institutional culture and the frequency and quality of inter- and intragenerational relationships showed significant, positive associations with future-oriented work ethic. The quality of inter- and intragenerational relationships, the level of trust, and the frequency of both intergenerational and intragenerational relationships all significantly increased the future-oriented work ethic of higher education students. Among the explanatory variables examined, supportive institutional culture showed the strongest effect.

In the second model, the positive effects of variables capturing institutional culture and the frequency and quality of inter- and intragenerational relationships persisted after the inclusion of social background variables. Alongside the positive supportive effects of the quality and frequency of inter- and intragenerational relationships, the level of trust, and supportive institutional culture, minority citizenship status and intact family structure significantly reduced students' future-oriented work ethic.

Table 1. The role of institutional culture, social relationships, and social background in shaping future-oriented work ethic (Beta regression coefficients)

Variable	Model 1 β	Model 2 β
Quality of faculty relationships – adequate information and fairness	0.086**	0.088**
Quality of faculty relationships – lack of information and misconduct	0.038	0.027
Trust in the institution	0.097**	0.083*
Frequency of intergenerational relationships	0.08*	0.089**
Frequency of intragenerational relationships	0.095**	0.086**
Perceived institutional culture	0.232***	0.252**
Identifies as belonging to a minority nation	–	–0.112***
Intact family structure (intact: biological parents)	–	–0.07*
Father with at most primary education	–	–0.019
Mother with at most primary education	–	0.025
Father with higher education	–	–0.014
Mother with higher education	–	0.054
Type of place of residence (urban) (dummy: 1 = urban)	–	0.009
Favourable subjective financial situation	–	0.04
Father/stepfather employed	–	0.036
Mother/stepmother employed	–	–0.026

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.005$, *** $p < 0.001$

Discussion

The results of the analysis clearly support the assumption put forward in previous research that the future-oriented work ethic of higher education students is closely associated with the characteristics of institutional

culture and the frequency and quality of inter- and intragenerational relationships. The consistent patterns of the bivariate analyses showed that both supportive, trust-based relationships with faculty and with fellow students, as well as a transparent, fair, and supportive institutional environment, are associated with greater future-oriented work ethic. The results particularly emphasized that even a single close relationship can strengthen future-oriented work ethic, while the expansion of the relational network has an additional reinforcing effect. Our results thereby supported our first, second, and third hypotheses.

The regression analyses confirmed that these relational and institutional factors not only co-occur with higher levels of future-oriented work ethic, but are also independent, significant predictors of it. Supportive institutional culture proved to be the strongest explanatory variable, maintaining its prominent effect even after controlling for social background variables. In addition, the quality and frequency of inter- and intragenerational relationships, as well as the level of institutional trust, all contributed to the strengthening of students' future-oriented work ethic. This suggests that future-oriented work ethic cannot be reduced to merely individual psychological or social, sociocultural characteristics, but is to a significant degree a socially and institutionally embedded phenomenon. Based on the results, our fourth hypothesis was not confirmed.

Conclusion

The results of our research reinforce the theoretical stance that future-oriented work ethic cannot be understood exclusively as an individual psychological trait, but manifests to a significant extent as an orientation embedded in social and institutional environments. The analyses clearly revealed that the quality of higher education institutions' functioning, the characteristics of institutional culture, and the relationships formed with faculty and peers are all associated with the development of students' future-oriented work ethic.

The results particularly highlighted the role of supportive institutional culture. Students who perceived their institution as fair, transparent, characterized by a supportive atmosphere, and development-oriented had significantly higher levels of future-oriented work ethic. The regression analyses identified perceived institutional culture as the strongest explanatory factor, which retained its significant effect even after controlling for social background variables. This suggests that the socializing function of higher education institutions plays a defining role in shaping students' future orientation.

The examination of inter- and intragenerational relationships also confirmed the importance of student socialization. Personal, supportive relationships with faculty were associated with higher future-oriented work ethic. Similarly, trust-based relationships with fellow students also showed a positive association with the indicator examined. This allows us to conclude that the formation of future-oriented work ethic is determined not only by individual factors, but also by the social experiences and relational resources acquired in the higher education environment.

Particular attention is warranted by the finding that the effect of institutional and relational factors persisted after the inclusion of social background variables. This suggests that a supportive institutional environment may also play a partially compensatory role for students from different social backgrounds. Our findings are especially relevant from this perspective in the context of the growing heterogeneity of the student body, as they show that higher education institutions may be capable of providing relational and cultural resources that contribute to strengthening students' long-term goal orientation.

Overall, our results draw attention to the fact that the role of higher education institutions is not limited to knowledge transfer and labour market preparation. Institutions also create social and cultural environments capable of shaping students' relationship with work, achievement, and the future. A supportive institutional culture built on trust and connection may therefore be not only a defining factor for student well-being or persistence, but may also represent an important condition for the development of long-term future-conscious orientation and a successful life course.

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