Thematic Article

Dropped-out Students and the Decision to Drop-out in Hungary

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Abstract: The interpretation of the phenomenon of student dropout, which represents a waste of a relatively large proportion of human and material capital in the social, individual and institutional domain, is impossible without examining dropout students. In this study, we analysed the DEPART 2018 database, which contains data from 605 Hungarian dropout students. We tried to identify higher education dropout scenarios and pointed out that higher educational dropout is a complex phenomenon. Based on the students' reports on their interpretation and evaluation of their dropouts, four student clusters were created. We compared the groups with their socio-cultural background and their decision to drop out from higher education, and their assessment of that decision. The most important result of the study is that it identifies a new group in addition to the international dropout types, and provides a detailed picture that calls our attention to the diversity of dropout groups, thereby moving beyond the over-generalised image of the dropout student.

Keywords: dropouts; dropout attitudes; dropout characteristics; higher education

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of dropout is one of the reasons why higher education is unable to fulfil its diverse social functions. In international comparisons, higher educational systems can be characterised based on the age-related proportions of entrance, persistence and success, and the social inequalities appearing in these figures. According to international research, in higher education, the proportion of those attending who are of high social status is twice as high as those of low status; however, only a tenth of the latter group can finish their studies (Vossensteyn, 2015). In Hungary, where the strong influence of social background is also decisive in public education, the inequalities in higher education continue to strengthen (Ceglédi, 2012). The loss is at the system level, so the talent and wasted resources lost in this way also have serious consequences at the individual level, including the time lost, the lower salary due to the delay in graduation, or failure to graduate, unemployment, and the mental and health problems caused by failures in the higher educational career. In our research, we questioned 605 students from almost 40 institutions, who have abandoned their higher education studies in the last 10 years without graduating.

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2. The reasons for dropout

With regard to the theories of dropout, it can be stated that, for obvious reasons, a complete coincidence between manifest causes and latent causes cannot be expected in this case, either. Young people who were often searching for their place in life even at the time of the survey are not able to reflect on the factors behind their failures. Nonetheless, examining and analysing student perceptions is clearly a reasonable endeavour, since behind such a major decision as the abandonment of higher educational studies, an individual and unique calculation can be found, even if this calculation does not bear the specific characteristics of a rational decision. The reason for this is that students do not usually have all the necessary information when making a decision to dropout, and even if this were the case, they would not be able to interpret it optimally in each case. Some of the factors explaining the decisions of dropout are macro level ones. Students are more or less explicitly pressured by the education policy trends, programs and reforms that have been launched by international and domestic actors, or their largely unintended consequences. We also have to consider the effects of institutional policy among meso-level factors. Based on the literature, the role of certain institutions and professional groups in controlling the reforms is well known, and can be regarded as dysfunctional. On the other hand, their essential function is to show the students the value of stability, in contrast to the extreme, doctrinal educational policy actions carried out without an impact assessment. In terms of the risk factors for dropout in higher education, there is considerable room for manoeuvre for higher education institutions, and the micro-level factors of drop-out can be clearly distinguished, although not all of these can be identified by the student. However, uncovering student perceptions regarding the reason for dropout is important, while, as the theory of decision-making school also states when examining the progress of studies, in decision-making situations multiple causes can be supposed, rather than just one reason. The reasons and explanations thus form a specific network, and in this way, tangible explanations can involve latent, identifiable macro- and micro-level causes. This explains why we considered it worthwhile to pay special attention to the conjunction of the explanations indicated by the students during the analysis (Brundsen et al., 2000).

When examining dropout, it is necessary to distinguish between the reasons for pulling out of education, both those pushing the individual out of the system and the external reasons leading them to drop out (Doll et al., 2013).

The literature identifies the following factors as ones which pull students out of the system: financial problems, difficulties or anxiety based on these problems, employment outside the institution, family responsibilities, changes in the family (marriage, childbirth), illness, and commuting from and living in remote areas. However, the promise of successful employment without a degree certificate and the social devaluation of the qualification or career can also be a factor pulling individuals out of the institution. These are collectively referred to as PULL-type of factors.

The negative factors within the institutional environment include the introduction of selective higher education policy regulators, the rigidity of institutional regulation, insufficient or inadequate provision of information for the students, unclear, unrecognizable and alienating standards as regards the requirements and assessment system, test and exam results which differ significantly from a normal distribution, unreasonably high tuition fees, cost reimbursement, bureaucratic rules, administrative and study barriers. All these act as displacement factors from the system. These are the PUSH-type of reasons.

The third group is disillusionment with the studies, the chosen career or the institution, the loss of motivation, and the gradually decreasing interest when the student does not appreciate the progress provided by the studies, the institution or the career chosen. This leads to a helpless drift from higher education. Several researchers note that this inadequate personal and institutional support can be regarded as a passive actor. These are collectively referred to as FALL OUT dropout. The literature draws attention to the fact that early dropout is not necessarily the result of an active decision taken alone or with the involvement of counsellors. The student slowly begins to construct an alternative interpretation of his/her higher education studies as a result of the experiences and observations interpreted in a smaller or larger negative context, an interpretation which initially

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coexists with the previously held image. Then, the unfavourable interpretation becomes more and more dominant, and finally everyday facts are interpreted as data for the implementation of the negative scenario. During our interview study, which was conducted before our questionnaire survey, it was absolutely clear that the previously stimulating aspirations of students were fading and, at the same time, the multiplication of hindering factors and aspects was visible, which made it possible to leave sooner or later (Watt & Roessingh, 1994; Dull, 2013). PULL, PUSH, and FALL OUT explanations were clearly seen in our data during the cluster analysis of the dropped-out students.

3. The groups of dropped-out students

The questionnaire survey was prepared with a qualitative interview. The subjects of the sample were obtained by the snowball method, and a total of 605 Hungarian students completed the questionnaire, which was surveyed by interviewers. Although our research is, therefore, not based on a representative sample, at the same time, there is little research data on this specific, hard to reach group, which has a relatively high number of participants.

In our analysis, we first examined the reasons for dropout identified by the students, and we present the student clusters based on these reasons. The respondents had to mark on a four-point Likert scale how much they agree with the statements targeting the reasons for dropping out. The formulation of the statements was helped by the results of a qualitative, interview study conducted in the first phase of our research. In terms of the frequency of dropout, the lack of time was the most important reason for dropout, on average, followed by the student being able to find a better opportunity elsewhere. Furthermore, the third most common explanation was incorrect behaviour by the lecturers, which can represent important information for institutions. According to the respondents, the deterioration of their health, and the end of the state-funded semesters played the least significant role, as did the fact that their peers did not help them, so they are not blamed for failure.

Following this, the reasons for the dropout detected by the students were examined by cluster analysis. With the command 'missing pairwise' we could reduce the lack of responses to 28 cases, and four clusters could be categorised. The names of the clusters were the following: those dropping out due to financial reason and work (PULL type), students highlighting academic and institutional reasons (PUSH type), resigned dropped-out students (PULL and PUSH together) and students being disappointed and loosing motivation (FALL OUT type). The numbers of the final items of the clusters were 125, 155, 162 and 135. It should be noted that the name of the clusters suggests that the student has done some kind of interpretative thinking after dropping out, closing the experience by indicating the explanation for his/her own situation. The third type could not rank the reasons. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that the members of this group can be characterised as being among the lowest social strata, who had to cope with difficulties to enrol on a course, had many external boundaries, had to commute or had a family and children. However, they were eager to learn and respected the world of higher education. We believe they are the ones mentioned in the literature as "aliens in Paradise" (Reay et al., 2009). Bourdieu (1978) draws attention to the fact that academic careers are based on their position in the social structure and the corresponding habitus. As the structural situation determines the interpretation of events, this career path is naturally available to us. The name of the third type expresses this non-reflective resignation.

4. The social background of the dropped-out students

53.8% of our dropped-out respondents are women, and 46.2% are men; however, this does not mean that women have a higher chance of dropping out, because there is a higher prevalence of female students (Fényes, 2010). No significant correlation could be detected between the clusters and gender, although women were overrepresented in the resigned dropout group while men were more likely to be present among students who are disappointed in further education (Table 1). Among the causes of dropouts, factors pushing students out of the university and external absorbing factors can be parallelly observed. These female students would probably be able to cope alone with one type of - external or internal - difficulty, but they could have decided to quit their courses due to a

combination of the factors. Men have lost their motivation and have moved to the world of work, which promises more rapid success, or to other institutions or courses (Fényes, 2010).

Table 1. Gender distribution in the clusters created according to the reasons for dropout (%). Source: DEPART 2018.

	Students dropping out due to financial reasons and work	Students highlighting academic and institutional reasons	Resigned dropped-out students	Students disappointed and losing motivation
Male N=247	50.0%	44.4%	38.7%	<u>54.2 %</u>
Female N=287	50.0%	55.6%	<u>61.3%</u>	45.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-square test is not significant. * In the case of the underlined values, the absolute value of the adjusted residual is higher than two

The average age of the dropped-out students in the study is 29 years. Age, as a continuous variable, had a significant correlation with the causes of dropout (p=0.001) as older people were more likely to be characterised by interrupting when studying under the pressure of several difficulties simultaneously. Younger participants were discouraged from studying by academic and institutional factors, as well as by disappointment in higher education and in their chosen profession. Resigned students are the oldest, with an average age of almost 31 years, followed by the students who dropped out due to financial reasons and work, who are close to their thirties. Students dropping out for academic and institutional reasons and due to disappointment are relatively young, as they are between 27 and 28 years.

The vast majority of respondents currently live in county towns (44.4%) or smaller towns (29.8%); 9.1% live in Budapest and 16.7% in villages or municipalities. Thus, four students out of ten, most often among those who drop out for academic and institutional reasons - as well as the resigned students, must travel to a higher education institution from a distance.

Social and cultural factors determine an academic career. There are some young people who are not studying because of their family background and cultural environment; the chance of participating in higher education and completing successfully is higher among students with graduate parents (Bright, 2010; Pusztai, 2011; Ceglédi, 2012; Fábri, 2014). Regarding the background of the dropped-out students, it can be stated that 9.5% of the mothers/foster-mothers had at least a primary education, 56.8% had a secondary educational level certificate and 33.7% had a higher educational degree. 7.9% of fathers/foster-fathers had finished only primary school. 66.9% of fathers/foster-fathers had a secondary educational level certificate and 25.1% of all fathers/foster-fathers in the sample were at the top of the hierarchy of the education system. On the whole, it can be stated that, among the dropped-out respondents, the children of parents with a secondary educational level are in a higher proportion compared to active students. However, the social groups with a secondary education level are a highly structured conglomerate in terms of family subculture, material status and parenting values. Thus, exploring the socio-cultural background of those at risk of dropout needs further refinement.

According to the examination of the correlation between the parents' educational level and the clusters of dropouts, the father's education had no impact on the causes of dropout (p=0.461); however, the educational level of the mother had a significant effect (p=0.044) (Table 2). The children of graduated mothers could clearly be described as being disappointed in their course, while the

children of parents with a primary and secondary educational level belonged to the resigned dropout group. In accordance with the concept of experimenting socialization, the children of graduate mothers try out further courses, either in a fee-paying form, or sometimes even undertaking to multiply the time spent on the course (Pusztai, 2011).

Our data confirmed the well-founded expectation that if the highest educational level of the mother was primary, financial difficulties were clearly present, and if they had a secondary education, then academic failures could be among the reasons for dropout. All this is in line with the results of the qualitative research of Bocsi et al. (2018a; 2018b), according to which people from lower social strata are more likely to work while studying, which is more due to compulsion than free will, and can lead to the interruption of higher education studies.

Table 2. The distribution of the educational level of the mother/foster mother in the clusters created according to reasons for dropout (%). Source: DEPART 2018.

	Students dropping out due to financial reasons and work	Students highlighting academic and institutional reasons	Resigned dropped-out students	Students disappointed and losing motivation
Primary N=52	<u>10.0%</u>	6.9%	<u>14.8%</u>	5.6%
Secondary N=308	56.7%	<u>57.6%</u>	<u>58.7%</u>	52.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

* In the case of the underlined values, the absolute value of the adjusted residual is higher than two

According to a previous student survey, in the case of state-funded courses in higher education, the impact of the financial situation of the family on the chances of dropout is mixed (Fényes et al., 2018). Half of our dropped-out respondents did not pay tuition fees during their studies, and respondents generally spent two semesters in fee-paying courses, meaning that the financial burden on students was primarily due to the cost of living (housing, meals, travel, clothing) and to expenses related to study and leisure-time activities. First, we examined the financial situation of the dropped-out students according to their possessions. In the entire sample, 19.4%, had their own car, 23.8% had an expensive laptop and 15.4% had savings for home, which indicates a relatively modest financial background, and there was no difference in the reasons for dropping out. On the whole, students who dropped out for financial reasons and work were the least well-off, correlating with our expectations, and resigned students, who were older compared to the other groups, were in the best position, although the situation of the group of those dropping out for academic and institutional reasons was also quite good.

We then examined the appearance of students' financial problems during their university years and the financial situation of the family compared to the former university peers, according to the reasons of dropout (Table 3). The students' financial situation and the financial situation of the family during the university years were significantly related to the reasons for dropout. Students who dropped out for financial reasons and work, as expected, were in the worst situation, and those who were disappointed in the course and in further education were in the best position. It seems that those who have made the wrong decision were not interested in further education, nor in the course; however, they were financially in a relatively good position during their studies. Following this, changes in the financial situation of the family during the university years were examined. It could

be stated that it is generally the case that the financial situation of the family of dropped-out students deteriorated during the university years.

Table 3. How was your own financial situation in the last semester of your higher educational studies? (p≤0,01). Source: DEPART 2018.

	Students dropping out due to financial reasons and work	Students highlighting academic and institutional reasons	Resigned dropped-out students	Students disappointed and losing motivation
I could afford material expenditures (e. g. travel, eating out in restaurants)	10.1%	17.1%	16.8%	<u>22.8%</u>
I had everything I needed but I could not afford large items of expenditure	59.7%	63.7%	58.7%	68.3%
Everyday financial problems sometimes occurred	<u>21.0%</u>	15.8%	14.2%	6.5%
Everyday financial problems often occurred	9.2%	3.4%	<u>10.3%</u>	2.4%
N	119	146	155	123

It is an important assumption that students perform poorly in higher education due to their inability to learn and their weak skills. As the competences of reading and comprehension are outstanding among the skills required for learning, the examination of book reading habits is a relevant issue. First, the reading habits of dropped-out students were investigated. Reading fine literature and specialised literature, as well as reading popular literature (in traditional or electronic form) had a significant correlation with the reasons for dropout. On the whole, dropped-out students read specialised literature the most frequently, while fine literature the least frequently, which is consistent with the fact that consumption of high-culture is relatively modest among young people. According to the reasons for dropout, those dropping out for academic reasons read less specialised literature, fine literature and popular literature, while resigned students were the most likely to read in these areas. The latter group are also older than the other respondents. The resigned dropped-out student group reads a lot, relatively speaking, and is more familiar with high culture, while those who drop out for academic or institutional reasons read less and lag behind, not only in high culture but also in reading specialised literature and popular literature. All this is in line with expectations, as academic progress is heavily influenced by participation in high culture (see the work of DiMaggio (1982) and Bourdieu (1998)).

Regarding the participation of dropped-out students in cultural consumption (reading fine literature and specialised literature, watching artistic films), resigned students were in the best position and those dropping out for academic reasons were in the worst situation, in line with the predictions of the literature.

5. The decision to drop out and its consequences

In our research, we examined how the fate of the dropped-out students and their perceptions about higher education evolved after the interruption of their studies. 52.3% of the respondents were employed in Hungary and 10.8% abroad, 13.8% studied on other courses, 4.2% became unemployed, 2.8% were learning a language, 2.8% had started a family, and 0.6% were caring for a family member or acquaintance by providing nursing care, while 12.7% chose the category 'other'. Activities done after the interruption of studies were linked to the clusters of dropped-out students. The majority of those who dropped out for financial reasons were employed in Hungary after finishing their studies. A lower proportion of those who interrupted their studies for academic and institutional reasons were employed in work in Hungary. 49.3% of the respondents who were uncertain about the reasons for dropout had a job in Hungary. 49.3% of respondents who were disappointed in the course and in further education were employed in their own country. From a comparison of the clusters, it can be seen that the proportion of those starting a family was overrepresented among the resigned dropped-out students, but the most typical activity was employment in Hungary in their case, as well. Relatively few dropped-out students chose the opportunity to study on other courses. Most of them were those who were disappointed in their previous course. After the interruption of the studies, a small proportion of dropped-out students chose language learning. Mostly those choosing language learning had dropped out for academic and institutional reasons.

During the study, we explored how dropped-out students currently evaluated their decision to discontinue their studies in higher education. 49% of the respondents said that quitting their studies was a good decision, 25.6% thought it was not a good decision, and 25.4% could not decide whether they had made a good decision. The connection between the dropped-out students' assessment of their decision and the clusters was examined, and a significant relationship could be found. The majority (64.9%) of those who believe that the reason for quitting their studies in higher education was disappointment in their studies still considered it to be the right decision. Half of the resigned respondents evaluated their situation in a similar way, while others considered the dropout decision less favourably. Although the 'good decision' is dominant in the evaluations of each cluster, a reduction in cognitive dissonance can be supposed to be operating in the background. The proportion of those who think that it was not a good decision to quit higher education was the highest among those dropping out for financial reasons. This also shows that these students are more committed to higher educational studies and graduation, and it is rather external factors which play a more important role in dropping out. As we discussed at the beginning of this chapter, decision-making does not always depend on the student, as several pull and push factors take the student out of the world of higher education. Medway and Penny (1994) distinguish between voluntary decisions and forced decisions in the case of dropped-out students. In the case of forced decision-making, dropout does not necessarily depend on the student's will. Voluntary decision-making can be regarded as a conscious act. In this case, the student makes his/her own decision. A voluntary decision is influenced by several factors, the improvement of which may prevent or hinder the interruption of studies.

We explored what the dropped-out students currently think about how they could have prevented their studies from being interrupted. Most of the respondents would consider a meso-level intervention to be effective. 13.9% of them think that more interesting interactive lessons could hinder dropout, while 15.7% say that more support is required from the lecturers to prevent dropouts. 8.8% would prevent dropouts by awarding higher scholarships, 12.7% by more favourable timetables, and 13.9% by more learning during the semester. 35% of the respondents indicated the option 'other'.

Opinions on the obstacles to interrupting studies were compared to the reasons for the dropout, and a significant connection was found on the basis of the comparison. The majority of former students who dropped out for academic and institutional reasons believed that interrupting their studies could have been avoided with more support from the lecturers. Half of the resigned students still cannot judge what would have prevented the interruption of their higher education. In the group of students who are disappointed with the course, students who think that more interesting, interactive lessons would be a preventive factor in dropout, are overrepresented.

One significant control question was whether the dropped-out students would still apply to a higher education institution, given their current knowledge. The majority of respondents (44.4%) would still apply, but would not select the institution they had previously chosen. A minority of respondents - 28.7% - would apply to the same higher educational institution as previously, and 26.9% would no longer apply for a university or college. 55.1% of the respondents would like to continue and finish their higher educational studies and 44.9% no longer want to study in higher education. On this basis, it can be seen that half of the students attribute their unsuccessful higher education career to their institutional experience. The majority of those who have resigned would give one more chance to their former institution and would apply for the same course they had studied on before. A significant proportion of the group of disappointed students would not currently apply for higher education. Those who dropped out due to financial reasons and those due to educational and institutional reasons would return to higher education, but they would select other courses.

We examined whether dropped-out students would like to complete their higher educational studies or not. The correlation of the question was compared with the dropout clusters, and a significant correlation was found on the basis of the comparison. In the group of those who dropped out for academic or institutional reasons, former students who want to continue their studies are overrepresented. The vast majority of former students who were disappointed in the course and further education in general, do not want to continue their studies. Those who dropped out due to financial reasons and those who are resigned prefer to continue their studies.

6. Summary

In our study, in an analysis of data related to 605 dropped-out students, we investigated how differentiated the phenomenon of dropout in higher education is. On the basis of the students' interpretations, four groups could be separated regarding the reasons for dropout, which were the following: those who dropped out due to work and financial burdens, those who referred to academic and institutional reasons, those disillusioned with further education and those who declined to give an explanation. The lesson from our research is that the reason for dropout is not only material, but that it affects one quarter of students.

The group of those dropping out for academic reasons, who have the lowest amount of their own cultural capital, did not receive support from their institution to help solve their problems. The children of families of higher status are at risk of disillusion with higher education, while the children of disadvantaged families, who make considerable efforts to gain access and respect for their desire for knowledge and the institution, had not been able to reflect on their failures by the time of the data collection.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Appendix

Cluster centrals. Source: DEPART 2018

	1	2	3	4
I did not want to choose this faculty/course.	1.60	1.30	1.30	2.27
After getting in, I found out that I was not interested in this faculty.	2.02	1.80	1.49	3.11
I have found a better opportunity.	2.59	1.90	1.95	2.89
It was hard for me to deal with the notes and the course books.	2.03	2.23	1.13	1.93
The exams went worse than I expected.	2.27	2.93	1.34	2.29
There was a lack of information.	2.38	2.76	1.25	1.98
I ran out of exam options.	2.35	2.17	1.12	1.57
I ran out of [financially] subsidised semesters.	2.74	1.20	1.16	1.26
I was under time pressure.	3.15	2.73	1.82	2.14
I went out a lot (for entertainment).	2.10	1.54	1.30	2.14
I took on too much work.	2.64	2.00	1.98	1.74
I had financial problems.	3.12	1.95	1.65	1.51
I could not pay the costs.	3.19	1.21	1.24	1.22
The teachers did not behave correctly.	2.18	2.98	1.59	2.11
The administration was not supportive.	2.15	2.80	1.47	1.82
The other students did not help.	1.68	1.94	1.17	1.62
I missed my friends and/or family.	1.70	1.61	1.28	1.80
I had health problems.	1.50	1.33	1.27	1.24
I was not able to concentrate during the seminars.	1.79	1.75	1.10	1.95

I was not interested in studying.	2.06	1.71	1.21	2.61
After my failures, I was not self-confident.	2.30	2.96	1.27	1.88
N (missing 28)	114	134	198	131

K Meanscluster, iteration 100, missingpairwise.

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