

Thematic Article

# The Situation and Chances of Roma students in Secondary and Tertiary Education in Hungary

Edit Csikós<sup>1</sup>, Mónika Rajcsányi-Molnár<sup>2</sup>

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**Abstract:** Addressing student drop-out or early school leaving has long been a major challenge for education policy makers at both national and international levels. This phenomenon affects all levels of education and has a profound impact on those classes of society that are economically and socio-culturally disadvantaged. This is particularly the case of the largest minority group in Hungary, the Roma, and its roots go back to primary education. Since the 1990s, so from the change of the regime, a positive tendency could have been observed in the completion of primary education, but in secondary school graduation and in obtaining a higher education degree they are still far behind the non-Roma population. In the current study, we identify causes of their learning failures, and we also present a selection of study grants that are available to young Roma students and support them to achieve higher levels of education. We also highlight the difficulties faced by those Roma youth, who have origins in traditional communities but obtain higher educational degrees.

**Keywords:** Roma students; dropout; higher education; equal opportunity

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## 1. Introduction

There has been a great deal of talk about the problem of early school leaving, on both national and international level. Public education has been hit hardest by the phenomenon, but there also has been a long history of mapping the causes of early school leaving in higher education and developing effective strategies to combat it. The present study examines the phenomenon mostly in its social aspects, especially with regard to the largest minority in our country, the Roma. By mapping the disadvantages accumulated in primary and secondary schools, we can get an idea of what causes them to drop out of tertiary education and to fail in their progress to graduation. We also present some study grants that are available to young people who are disadvantaged because of their ethnic or social background.

## 2. Early school leavers

When talking about the term of early school leaving, it is important to clarify that in the practice of public education decades ago, it was primarily understood as a consequence of learning fiasco and school failure, but today the English term "early school leaving" (ESL) has become more widespread in international and domestic vocabulary. Young people aged 18-24, who have not completed upper secondary education and are not participating in any form of education or training are considered early school leavers. In terms of higher education, according to the Hungarian Rectors' Conference in 2016, students who leave the institution without a completed qualification are considered drop-out students, even those who do not receive a diploma because they lack a language exam (András et al., 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> University of Dunaújváros, Hungary, csikosne@uniduna.hu

<sup>2</sup> University of Dunaújváros, Hungary, molnarmo@uniduna.hu

The term, “ESL”, is perhaps more complete in the sense that it also refers to the consequences of dropping out of school, that early school leaving may be a major risk. In the absence of qualifications, one may be excluded from the labour market at an early stage and this constitutes a significant threat at both individual and social level. However, in the case of higher education, it would not be fortunate to use the ESL term, as it often also implies the failure to reach a particular degree, not just to abandon studies.

### 3. Strategic steps against drop-out

There is a large body of literature on early school leaving and measures to improve at the policy level not only the domestic but the international situation of education as well (Álvarez et al., 2016). The main reason for this is that in 2011 the Council of the European Union issued a specific recommendation to its Member States to reduce high rates of early school leaving and to take effective action not only in prevention and intervention, but also in compensation.<sup>3</sup>

In order to achieve the EU2020 strategic goals, the domestic commitment under the National Reform Program was to reduce the rate of 18-24-year olds leaving secondary education / vocational education below 10 percent by the end of the decade. To this end, a Medium-Term Strategy to Combat Early School Leaving was issued and announced in November 2014 by Government Resolution 1603/2014.<sup>4</sup>

The Human Resources Operational Program (EFOP), which also defines the aims and direction of EU funding, emphasizes the development of an early warning and pedagogical system to help identify the social and educational factors leading to early school leaving and to monitor the learning pathways of the most vulnerable groups.

The fight against drop-out is important in many ways. Obviously, it is important internationally that a country have a high level of educational attainment, but, to an individual, the kind of labour market opportunities that are obtainable and the income he / she can earn with the acquired qualifications are also important. Statistics still show that the lowest number of unemployed people is among those owning a diploma, not to mention they have higher wages than those with lower education. Based on this, we can assume that a higher level of education also provides better socio-economic opportunities, thus effectively reducing early school leaving and increasing the rate of upper secondary education would open the door to entering higher education institutions and obtaining diplomas.

There are many factors behind the causes of drop-out, the most important of which is the inadequate economic and cultural situation of the family background, the lack of motivation and the insufficient level of knowledge. The national tendency is that almost 40% of the students entering higher education do not continue their studies after the first year and leave the institution without qualification. The above-mentioned causes are proved to appear in a more pronounced way among the students coming from the Romani community, and the question arises, by what measures, if at all, could the situation be efficiently remedied (Picker, 2017)?

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<sup>3</sup> Tájékoztató a lemorzsolódás megelőzését szolgáló beavatkozásokról és a korai jelzőrendszerhez kapcsolódó korai jelző- és pedagógiai támogató rendszer tervezett tevékenységeiről. [Information on interventions to prevent early school leaving and planned activities of early warning and pedagogical support systems related to early warning systems. Full text:

[https://www.oktatas.hu/pub\\_bin/dload/kozoktatas/lemorzsolodas/ESL\\_intezmenyi\\_beavatkozasok\\_tevékenységek\\_taj201612.pdf](https://www.oktatas.hu/pub_bin/dload/kozoktatas/lemorzsolodas/ESL_intezmenyi_beavatkozasok_tevékenységek_taj201612.pdf) [2019. 12. 12.]

<sup>4</sup> A végzettség nélküli iskolaelhagyás elleni középtávú stratégia. [A medium-term strategy for combating early school leaving. Full text:

<http://www.kormany.hu/download/5/fe/20000/V%C3%A9gzetts%C3%A9g%20n%C3%A9lk%C3%BCli%20iskolaelhagy%C3%A1s%20.pdf> [2019. 12. 12.]

#### **4. The root of the problem: the expansion of secondary and tertiary education**

One of the achievements with the greatest social significance of the post-communist period was the mass penetration of middle-class education and the acceptance of broad classes in contrast to the former elitist line of higher education institutions. However, for disadvantaged groups, such as the Roma, this opportunity was not as accessible as for members of the majority. Many people believe that this period was a watershed for the present state of society: "today's Hungarian society is split between young people who have access to knowledge and the opportunity to live a decent life, and those who are deprived of this opportunity and, therefore, are condemned to poverty and exclusion from society" (Hajdu et al., 2014). Those who are unable to obtain a secondary school graduation, or some kind of a secondary education certificate have to settle for irregular employment and / or unemployment. And, obviously, the question of continuing education cannot arise for them.

Compared to the post-communist years, the current level of education of Roma students is higher. While in the '90s a 20-year-old Roma young person had almost no chance to attain secondary school graduation, nowadays one in five in this age group graduates. Other education statistics have also improved, as around 4-5% of students of the given age group enrolled in a university or college. However, compared to the majority, where three-quarters of the given age group already have secondary school graduation and one-third of them enter higher education, their proportion is still lagging behind (Hajdu et al., 2014).

#### **5. The disadvantages of Roma children at school**

At this point, we could say that the secondary education picture is already showing a peak, but in order to explore the problem even further, we need to dig deeper.

Based on István Kemény's demographic research, it can be said that the proportion of younger age groups is very high among Gypsies, as nearly 33% of them are children, i.e. under 16 years of age and thus they have to attend school. The proportion of those aged 15 to 39 years is 43%, which has also contributed to the increase of their number in public education. However, sociological studies in education clearly demonstrate that our public education system is still not able to handle the situation properly, although it is now commonplace to recognize that education is the most obvious way out of disadvantage and poverty (Kispál, 2015).

The failure of Roma students at school has many components, their roots being found in kindergarten (Fiáth, 2000). The kindergarten is the first institutionalized arena of public education that not only socializes, but also provides some form of entry to primary school. It is here that language compensation, as well as the establishment of the norms and value system of the majority society can be realized first. Compared to the 1970s, the number of Roma children in kindergartens has quadrupled, with nearly two-thirds of those aged 3 to 6 visiting them in 2011, similar to the majority society. But there still persisted the problem that these institutions did not exist in the remote, marginalized, economically peripheral settlements, so the inhabitants were deprived of an important place of socialization. In many cases, mistrust of the kindergarten was the reason for absenteeism, as well as lack of material requisites such as proper clothing and equipment. A study by Katalin Pik in 2000 also confirmed that 10% of Roma children were not at all eligible to start primary school. This situation was slightly improved by the Public Education Act introduced on September 1, 2014, which required compulsory attendance at kindergarten from the age of 3.

Based on 2011 census data, there is no significant difference in attending primary education between Roma and non-Roma children. Substantial differences are much more noticeable in output and performance. According to the latest census, 23% of Roma over the age of 15 have not completed primary education and, compared to non-Roma children, only 40-45% of them do finish primary education under 14 years of age. About 10% of them do not complete their studies at all, i.e. they drop out. Linguistic disadvantages, family socialization and other social and economic indicators also play a major role in this (Fónai & Vitál, 2012). Attila Papp Z. also reports in 2011 that, due to the underdevelopment of the given settlements, ghettoised, segregated institutions have emerged, where academic performance is far below the average. And school failure is exacerbated by the poor social

situation of the Roma population, high unemployment, discrimination, lack of competent pedagogical practice and problems in school organization (Babusik, 2003).

## 6. Graduation - The Unattainable?

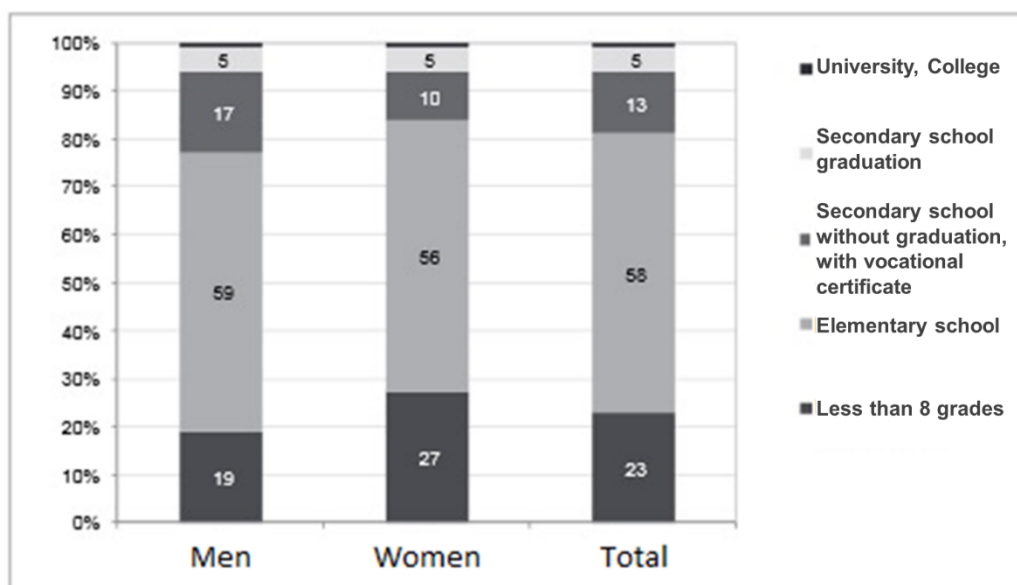
While Roma students completing primary education paints a much better picture compared to the situation before the change of the political system, it seems that completing secondary school and obtaining graduation has become the watershed between majority and minority education. In the 16-19 age group, 85% of non-Roma attend an educational institution, but the figure for Roma is only around 58%.

Tamás Hajdu, Gábor Kertesi and Gábor Kézdi conducted a study entitled “Roma Young People in Secondary School” in 2014, which looked at the secondary education career and the chances of attaining a university in the case of a complete secondary school cohort of Roma and non-Roma students in Hungary based on the data of TÁRKI Career Survey between 2006-2012. Researchers looked for the reasons behind Roma students' unsuccessful secondary school performance, which would further explain their low enrollment in higher education (Hajdu et al., 2014).

The chosen class enrolled in secondary school in the fall of 2006 and, according to the latest observations of the researchers, they could complete their secondary education studies by the end of the 2011/12 school year. At the end of the study, it was well established that 46% of participants with Roma origins had completed secondary school, but only 22% had obtained graduation, which seems to be a low figure, but is significantly higher than in the case of previous generations. The researchers also compared the results with a Roma cohort born nearly 20 years earlier, in 1974, to illustrate the change in ratios. While only 9% of the young people belonging to the majority society dropped out of secondary school and did not graduate, 48% of the Roma young people, i.e. almost half of them, left without any qualification and only one quarter succeeded in obtaining graduation.

Although the data are rather unfavourable, they show a significant positive change compared to the period before the change of regime, since the Roma cohort born in 1974 did not even have a chance to reach secondary education. However, the positive turn in primary and secondary education has no longer continued on the path towards graduation and diploma earning.

The following figure illustrates this well, where the educational attainment of the Roma population aged 15 and over is shown by gender, based on the latest census data (Kispál, 2015).



**Figure 1.** Educational attainment of the Roma population aged 15 and over. Source: Census Data, KSH 2011.

Unfortunately, it is precisely in those areas where primary or vocational education is sufficient that wage increases have been the lowest in the last 20 years. In other words, despite the increased level of education among Roma, this did not bring about a significant change in their standard of living. However, it is interesting to take a look at that part of the study which analyses the role of the residence in disadvantaged communities in school failure, for living in underdeveloped regions is considered one of the main causes of Roma underachievement. However, in this case the study refuted this fact, because the outline of the Hungarian secondary school network showed that the picture is quite uniform, that is, there are few settlements in Hungary, which would not have small towns or large villages with secondary education institutions in their neighbourhood. Therefore, the geographical distance of secondary schools and the resulting additional costs are not reasons for the underachievement of Roma young people in secondary schools.

There is a much stronger correlation between the low performance in secondary school and the lack of basic skills originated in primary education, which also goes back to pre-school and early school years (Hajdu et al., 2014). As we mentioned earlier, inadequate kindergarten education, underdeveloped socialization, and inadequate efforts to get their learning caught up to the majority have all been causes of the problem. However, these could have been compensated for at an early stage, but the lack of knowledge and competence of the Gypsy children rolled before them for years can no longer find a remedy in secondary school.

Based on all these, the large differences in the graduation scores between Roma and non-Roma students are no longer surprising. Here, too, lower results can be traced back to pre-secondary school period, and it can be noticed the significant impact they have on the subsequent acquisition of tertiary education. Students have fewer opportunities to access further education and better universities with lower graduation scores. Almost every second secondary school graduate non-Roma youngster in the 20-21 age group enrolls in tertiary education, whereas only one out of five Roma graduate students goes to college or university this age.

Today, only 18% of the total Roma population have completed secondary education (out of which only 5% have secondary graduation and 13% have got only vocational certificate), a fact attributed by professionals also to segregation, i.e. education in inappropriate conditions and with inadequate methods. Although educational policy measures have been taken to counteract this, the school segregation index has shown a 10% rise in the number of disadvantaged and multiple disadvantaged students over the past decade, with the largest proportion being Roma (Hajdu et al., 2018). Separate education of Roma children is still one of the major problems of Hungarian public education. The worsening of the situation is well illustrated by the increase in the number of the so-called ghetto schools (with at least 50 percent Roma children): in 2007 there were nearly 270 such schools in the country, and by 2015 their number was close to 350. The European Commission also pointed out in its report on Hungary in 2016 that early school leaving for Roma students is more than six times as high (59.9%) as for non-Roma (8.9%), and effective strategic tools and programs should be developed to eliminate the situation.<sup>5</sup>

## 7. Disadvantage vs. higher education chances

Secondary school expansion following the change of regime has already been mentioned, but when examining the chances of further education of Roma students, we should also mention the mass expansion of higher education.

Starting with the second half of the 20th century, a change in the higher education system of developed countries can be observed. As a result of the increase in the students' number in the 1960s, tertiary education left its former elite character and soon became massive, meaning that even those who earlier had had no chance to enrol already entered the institutions (Hrubos, 2016). The number of students enrolled in universities and colleges in Hungary too has increased dramatically since the

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<sup>5</sup> Evaluation of the implementation of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies and the Council Recommendation on effective action by the Member States in favor of Roma inclusion – 2016. [Full text: <http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2016/HU/1-2016-424-HU-F1-1.PDF>] [2019. 12. 13.]

1990s, peaking in the 2004-2005 school year, when 24% of the 18-22 year age group studied in higher education.<sup>6</sup> This number has fallen by now, but the image created by the expansion persists until now.

Among the major changes we would like to emphasize the composition of students. Also referred to as "non-traditional" are those students who have a lower socio-economic and cultural background, are disadvantaged, belong to a minority ethnic and / or religious group, but in some interpretations are considered "non-traditional" students, those studying beside work, older people and women (Pusztai, 2013). Roma students thus cover the category of non-traditional students in several ways.

In examining the high drop-out rate in higher education due to its expansion, the primary causes include inadequate background knowledge and individual funding problems. The lack of basic skills mentioned in the case of Roma students' secondary school failure plays a significant role in the problem, but we would also like to see whether the social disadvantage can be compensated for to some extent at the state and / or institutional levels to give a shot at a diploma to these students also.

First of all, it is important to clarify who in Hungary today is considered to be a disadvantaged student (DS) or multiple disadvantaged student (MDS). The XXXI / 1997 Act on the Protection of Children and Guardianship states that a child who qualifies for regular childcare benefits and whose parents have a low level of education, low employment or inadequate living environment are considered disadvantaged. Multiple disadvantaged are defined those for which apply at least 2 of the above mentioned conditions. In higher education, Article 108 (10) of the CCIV Act also emphasizes these criteria and adds that this category is real for persons less than 25 years of age.

A disadvantaged or multiple disadvantaged status is rewarded with an extra 40 points during the recruitment process, which unfortunately, in many cases, also gives rise to misuse, as we cannot gain insight into the work of the municipalities and notaries who determine this eligibility in the respective settlements. In addition to the extra points, Section 54 of the Higher Education Act also proposes a mentoring program be provided by the institution to students with DS / MDS status.

According to the Government Decree no. 311/2007, all settlements which in their economic, social and infrastructure indicators are below the average of the complex indicators of all micro-regions are considered disadvantaged. This is important because some higher education social assistance programs may include students who can prove that they are from such settlements. However, for somebody to originate from a disadvantaged settlement is far from being disadvantaged or multiple disadvantaged, since she/he also has to meet the above-mentioned conditions.

In its study entitled "The Chances of young people living in disadvantaged micro-regions to enter higher education", based on the data of felvi.hu from between 2001–2017, István Polónyi investigated the differences between the applications and vocational choices of state-sponsored full-time basic level students from the 40 most disadvantaged and the 41 most advantaged micro-regions, and how different education policy decisions affected their chances to enter higher education. Based on OH data from 2008, it is noticeable that disadvantaged students are overrepresented in basic and tertiary vocational training compared to master and graduate programs. Obviously, it is important from a financial point of view that the chosen program is as short termed as possible and less expensive. Polónyi's study also looks at application statistics for the years 2010, 2013 and 2017, as education policy made decisions just prior to these periods that adversely affected those applying from disadvantaged regions.

The tuition fee, planned for 2007 as a "development contribution," visibly set back the enrollment on the basis of 2008 figures, as did the introduction of a high (essentially double) tuition fee for 2013 and the two-level graduation, as entrance examination filter. The table below shows that the chances to enter higher education of those coming from disadvantaged micro-regions have worsened in relation to the average of all training; compared to the top 40 micro-regions this percentage was

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<sup>6</sup> Expansion of higher education in the Hungarian regions and in the European Union. [Full text: [https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/idoszaki/pdf/felsook\\_exp\\_eu.pdf](https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/idoszaki/pdf/felsook_exp_eu.pdf)] [2019. 12. 13.]

exceeded only in 2013 in the publicly funded programs, which is due to the introduction in 2011 of 40 plus points for disadvantageous status.

**Table 1.** Differences in the Chances to Enter Higher Education Compared to the Average of All Micro regions for the Years 2010, 2013 and 2017. Source: Polónyi, 2018.

	Total Studies			Basic (and Undivided) Full-time Studies			State-funded Studies		
	2010	2013	2017	2010	2013	2017	2010	2013	2017
40 most disadvantaged									
– all Micro-regions	-2	-1	-3	-4	-2	-4	0	2	0
Average									
41 most advantaged									
micro-regions – all	1	0	1	2	0	1	-1	-2	-1
Micro-regions Average									
40 most advantaged									
(without Budapest) – all	2	1	1	2	2	2	1	0	1
Micro-regions Average									

There are already programs for students with DS and MDS status to prepare for and support their entry into higher education. One of the most well-known is the János Arany Talent Care Program, which can be applied for by people from disadvantaged communities, as well as the various "Journey Provision" programs, which provide non-cash grants in addition to the scholarship.

DS and MDS students who are already enrolled in higher education have several programs available to help them remain there. Examples of these would be the following: the "Path to Diploma" program (scholarship and cost subsidy for training programs ending with a diploma), the regular social scholarship of the "Path to Higher Vocational Qualification" program (95% of scholarship or cost), available at all institutions, the "One-time Basic Enrollment Grant", the Bursa Hungarica Scholarship (it may be provided by the local government and the higher education institution so it is not available to everyone), and other organizational grants provided by individual universities and colleges. Further examples are, the "Path to Diploma" program (scholarship and self-cost subsidy training), the "Path to Higher Vocational Qualification" program (95% of scholarship or self-cost), regular social scholarships such as the "One-time Basic Enrollment Grant", the Bursa Hungarica Scholarship (it may be provided by the local government and the tertiary institution so it is not available to everyone), and again other organizational grants provided by individual universities and colleges.

## 8. Roma in Higher Education

Based on the gender distribution, we can state that the tendency is the same for the Roma population as for the society as a whole: the proportion of women in higher education is higher than that of men. Social strata assimilated into the mainstream society, in order to achieve a better social position, as Katalin Forray R. puts it, "send their daughters to higher education branches not highly valued on the labour market, but important for social prestige ..." (Forray R., 2003). Girls who are mainly in kindergarten and teacher education often achieve a degree in their family with a college degree by getting married in the right place. However, tertiary education also has disadvantages in terms of community: the more traditional the background, the more difficult it will be to find a couple because of their longer studies and in many cases, due to their literacy and knowledge, they will not find their way back into the community.

Gypsy students enrolled in full-time education also tend to have a higher age. Many of them first pursue a profession after graduation or go to work and then sit back on the school desk. Often, low-skilled parents do not even recognize the dormant talent in their children, or they see as the only

source of prosperity the acquiring of a manual profession. In secondary school, Roma students may not receive the encouragement from the institution to pursue higher education. And while there are many scholarships available for Roma students, we still have to assume in the case of an adult enrolled in full-time study, often having a family, some kind of employment which often limits the amount of time spent studying.

A small sample survey of Katalin Forray R. among Roma students also points out that, in Roma families where parents are more educated, children, as in majority society, are at least one step above their parents' highest educational attainment and do not have as many siblings as their peers from less educated families. However, it is also true that almost half of Roma young people in higher education do not have a standards or examples to learn from at home, nor do they have the habits and routines of being intellectual, which may pose additional challenges for them.

In addition to existing higher education support programs, there are many that have been specifically designed to help students with a Roma background. One example is the Romaversitas Foundation, which has been supporting non-governmental and EU funding for talented Roma secondary school and university students for nearly 20 years, including the goal of forming Roma young intellectuals who are committed to the cause of Roma. As part of the "Journey Provision" programs, it is possible to apply for the so-called MACIKA program (Foundation for Roma in Hungary), but its credibility has been questioned in recent years by the fact, that also people of non-Roma origins had the possibility to apply for it.

The OSI-HESP Roma Higher Education Memorial Scholarship Program is aimed at Roma full-time students and favours those who are dealing with social sciences among the higher education programs. The Roma Education Fund, launched in 2011, also aims to provide scholarships for young Roma intellectuals and to reduce educational disadvantages between Roma and non-Roma.

In 2012, an EU call for proposals was launched to support Special Colleges or Colleges for Advanced Studies which, in their articles of association, undertook supporting disadvantaged Roma / Gypsy students. In this way, the Department of Romology and Educational Sociology at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Pécs was able to support the Wislocki Henrik Special College, which has carried out numerous research studies, putting on professional and community programs with the participation of Roma students, tutors and other senior students (mentors).

It is also important to mention the role of Roma Special Colleges run by different confessions, providing accommodation, scholarships, special classes and spiritual programs for young people of different higher education specializations, thus giving them a great chance of becoming intellectuals (Kardos, 2014).

What is surprising, however, is that while there are several support programs available for entry and remaining, after graduation, Roma youth with DS and MDS are 'let go'. The job-seeking or the initial low-wage employment period is no longer supported beyond the available state social benefits, though many would seek a diploma if there were programs that would help newly graduated disadvantaged young people get started. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the social stereotypes of the Roma persist despite their education, that is, they often encounter resistance when looking for a job because of their origin.

Criticism of the European Commission and achievements for 2020 also play a role in the progress made by government measures on Roma education, but despite the positive indicators, their proportion in the secondary and tertiary education is still far below that of non-Roma students.

## 9. Conclusion

All the literature used has highlighted the origin of the failure of Roma pupils at school and why the ever higher and more difficult grades can be achieved by only a few of them. While after the change of the system there is an increasing tendency towards the basic education of the Roma, in the process of graduation and attainment of a diploma we can witness a reverse process. Secondary school dropout studies clearly demonstrate that early childhood socialization deficits, kindergarten-related problems and the lack of basic skills accumulated in the primary school lead to the drop-out



of the majority of Roma students without completing their secondary school and without graduation. As a result, few people even get to apply for higher education institutions, and it is also difficult for them to gain access to universities and colleges due to their lack of knowledge that implies lower graduation results.

Several governmental, foundation- and EU-funded programs aim to help increase the number of Roma intellectuals in the community, primarily through scholarships to compensate for financial disadvantages and to provide professional support through mentoring. However, Roma people involved in higher education also have to face problems stemming from their origins in traditional communities without intellectual backgrounds and with different family value systems.

Educational policy measures in recent years have improved the situation of Roma students in secondary and tertiary education, but school segregation continues to be a feature of our domestic education system and the aspirations of desegregated institutions are often impeded by meaningless central decisions (see the case of Vadgesztenye School, Pécs). In addition, despite the higher recognition of graduates in society, this is not obvious in the case of Roma intellectuals. This is due to stereotypical thinking, which makes it difficult for them to find employment in line with their qualifications in the labour market. All in all, we believe that helping the Roma catch up educationally and winning them equal treatment in society (both EU targets for 2020) will remain to be seen

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