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Successful students with disabilities and learning difficulties in higher education in Hungary

Abstract

The focus of our research is on students with disabilities by the current Higher Education Act in Hungary. The actuality of the topic is that after the millennium due to the expansion of higher education, the above-mentioned students appeared at universities, but at the law dealing with their presence in Hungary only since 2007. Earlier researches have studied the accessibility and inclusive practices of the institutions internationally and in Hungary, but only little attention has been paid to these students' chances of acquisition and retention to higher education. Equal opportunities in higher education appear to be an important supporting factor in our research, however, the exact social context of the individual has a great influence on successful entry and graduation. As a further research opportunity, a deeper, more extensive quantitative study of the institutional presence of students with disabilities and the factors contributing to their learning success is emerging.

1 Introduction

Due to the expansion in higher education in Hungary, student groups, called non-traditional students, have appeared at universities (Fenyves et al., 2017; Attewell et al., 2007; Harper, Quaye, 2009; Pusztai, 2011), which includes first-generation graduates from low-status families, women, parents of little children, members of ethnic groups and religious groups, those who starting higher education at an older age and students, who are studying and working at the same time, but Pusztai and Szabó (2014) also lists non-traditional the students with disabilities or special educational needs. All of these student groups have higher risk of dropping out of higher education, so higher education is not able to perform effectively its task to balance social inequalities because of the drop out (Fenyves et al., 2017). However, a higher education system is inclusive only if it is accessible to all levels of society, not just the elite's privilege (Kiss, 2016). However, if non-traditional students are being able to reach segments in the labour market that have been excluded before then, inequalities in society can be reduced and social mobility can increase. (Kiss, 2016).

The appearance of students with disabilities and learning difficulties in higher education can be dated in 2002-2003 in Hungary. (Laki, 2015). Based on the 2011 census data of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH), which is the latest data at the moment, it can be seen that in terms of the population as a whole, the number of people with disabilities shows a decreasing trend, however, despite the headcount reduction, their number is constantly increasing in higher education. Despite the fact that more and more people with disabilities are attending university, there are still very few people with disabilities in higher education, and only 9% of the total disabled population have a diploma in 2011 in Hungary (KSH, 2015). However, in Hungary, we only have a census every ten years, and we do not have more recent data on the population.

There are few researches and literatures on students with disabilities in Hungary (Bánfalvy, 2014), however, it can be seen from these few data that the proportion of people who get a degree in the disabled population is lower than the average population. In one of its publications on the 2011 census, the KSH mentions that its proportion varies by disability type but is generally observable. Education is one of the main contributors to the social integration of people with disabilities and thus to the chances of the labour market (Kálmán, Könczei, 2002). It is a problem in Hungary that their entry into primary schools may also be difficult, and it is also a major difficulty to pursue further education from segregated education and because they are less likely to enter higher education, this makes it harder for them to find job opportunities too (Kálmán, Könczei, 2002). In addition to the low level of education, the Hungarian literature considers social difficulties, social prejudices and obstruction from certain professions as an additional difficult factor that comes from segregation (Kálmán, Könczei, 2002). However, there has been a slight improvement in recent years in terms of qualifications and the labour market. Disabled people have significantly increased their highest completed education, and the number of graduates is increasing (Laki, 2017). However, in 2001, only 5.2% of the population with disability got a degree, and in 2011 this rate is still below 10% in Hungary. In addition to the highest level of education completed, there is also an improvement in the chances of people with disabilities in the labour market. According to the results of the 2016 KSH micro-census, the number of people with disabilities who have job increased by 3% between 2011 and 2016 in Hungary (KSH, 2018). This proportion would be significantly improved by facilitating access to degree for people with disabilities. That is why it is necessary to make higher education more accessible to them, as the chances of increasing their position in the labour market can increase significantly as the level of education increases (Laki, 2017).

2 Description of the research

2.1 Research Goals

The aim of the qualitative stage of the research is to reveal the supportive forces that can help students with disabilities and learning difficulties during their studies, and to discover how the decisive power of these supporting forces is reflected in the success in their studies.

Based on the review of the literature and Hungarian law, the following hypotheses and research questions were set up:

Hypotheses:

- It is assumed that the existence of institutionalized helping services alone is not enough to successfully complete higher education
- It is assumed that the supporting factors already determine the progress of studies at an early age

Research questions:

- What are the most frequently asked helping services in higher education and how do these affect study success?
- Do equal opportunities in higher education have an impact on the career choices of the students with disabilities?

2.2 Sample and methods

In the qualitative phase of the research we conducted a semi-structured interview with people with disabilities who have studied in full-time or are still studying in a Hungarian higher education institution. Ten people with disabilities participated in our study, including 3 people with graduate degrees, 3 people currently studying, and 4 former students, so they dropped out of higher education. This division is justified by the fact that, through the experiences of graduates and dropouts, the components of supporting and hindering factors can be explored, and current student reports show that the components of equal opportunities in today's practice are more sharply observed.

According to the type of disability, the distribution of subjects is as follows. People with sensory disabilities include 1 person with visual impairment, 2 people with hearing impairments, with learning difficulties 1 person with dyscalculia, and 5 people with dyslexia, and 1 person with autism spectrum disorder participated in the study.

As a limit of the research, we should mention the difficult accessibility of the subjects and their small number in higher education. Depending on this, the purpose of our study is to reveal the difficulties of the students with disabilities, the circumstances of their studies through interviews, which may later be based on a broader questionnaire survey.**3 Results of the qualitative phase of the research**

Interviewees are people with special educational needs who have studied in a wide range of disciplines. They are approximately the same age group, aged 22-27.

Most of the respondents studied in an integrated institution throughout their studies. Two interviewees were temporarily involved in special institutional education at primary school, one of them (our visually impaired respondent) during the whole primary school, and one of our respondents (with autism spectrum disorder) studied in a special institution when he was in his 5-7th class in primary school.

In the course of our research, we try to reveal the supporting and retaining forces that can be associated with the respondents' learning success and commitment.

During the analysis we distinguished successful and less successful study paths. In order to identify success, we summarized the extent to which individual interviewees are committed to their studies. If they have already left higher education, have they successfully completed their degree or not, and after completing their studies, have they developed their life and plans for the future.

Thus, we considered the study paths of those respondents who were committed to their current studies, or who had successfully completed higher education, and then found their place on the labour market. Less successful students were those who were not committed to their studies, dropped out of higher education without graduation, and then did not settle their situation, and those who had major difficulties in graduation, and these obstacles still exist today.

In our research, we try to find out the factors and effects that can be used to identify what helps students with disabilities to achieve a successful graduation and employment. During the analysis, the following factors emerged, which can be used to characterize the subjects: family, especially the influence of parents, the influence of teachers, the attitude of the other students, the conditions of applying for higher education, academic success, and the services required during the studies.

3.1 Family

In the case of the successful respondents, for the parents of each of them learning is important and devoting their time to helping their children as well. This was manifested in both shared learning and the financing of extracurricular lessons, especially for those who had already discovered disability and special educational needs in the early years.

In which case there was no parental support, there was another family member, such as a grandparent's prominent attention and support.

In each case, the parents tried to adapt their expectations to their children's skills, but these expectations were not too low. The lack of parental support appeared in only one of the subjects who was successful, that their parents did not recognize dyslexia as a real problem. However, for this subject, institutional support has been prominently displayed, practically compensating for the negative parental attitude.

Subjects with less successful study pathways have all reported that their parents considered learning outcomes important, but they did not provide adequate support. These respondents assume that their parents' schedule and the lack of information about the available options are may be the reason for the lack of adequate support.

An example of this is the report of one of our interviewees:

"They helped my studies to a full extent from a financial point of view, but since they both worked in a three-shift work schedule, I don't think they could devote as much attention to my studies as they would have liked to." (27 / M / Dyslexia)

Thus, the family environment and the influence of parents can be said to be of particular importance in helping their students with disabilities, especially during the years spent in public education. In addition to the appropriate support, the recognition and acceptance of existing difficulties and the adaptation to the level of expectations and support have proved to be important.

3.2 Teachers

If we look at the role of teachers in support, we can see that when a student was not found to be disabled at birth, the teacher played an important role in finding out about disability. The subjects report that they are due to a teacher to discover their special educational needs.

In addition, the supportive activities of teachers are also manifested in helping, encouraging, motivating, and emphasizing the importance of further education during their studies.

The majority of successful respondents reported that teachers supported them in accordance with their abilities and were aware of whether they were able to follow the course of the lesson. One of our hearing-impaired subject reported that her teachers have also recognized other achievements of her, they have tried to get the most out of her skills, such as being praised for her sports results at the end of high school. Another hearing-impaired respondent reported that there were teachers who had specifically trained on how to educate children with special needs because of her.

Our less successful respondents basically went to schools where there was no further education at a higher prestigious school, and further education from high school to higher education, so teachers did not pay enough attention to the question of further education in the case of our interviewees.

However, in the case of successful and less successful students, it can be said that the experiences of public education in many cases did not correspond to the way in which teachers treated the students in higher education. Based on the answers, teachers were less attentive to the students in higher education, and they were not interested in whether everyone could follow the course of the lesson. However, due to the small sample, we did not get a comprehensive picture of how the instructors' attitudes appear in different areas of training, so that the difference between the disciplines in this respect cannot be examined on the basis of these results.

"In the high school, they pay more attention to students. There are completely different circumstances at the university, if you have heard something, then you have heard, if not, then look for it. Whether the information is available or not, they are no longer interested in it." (26 / F / Hearing)

One of the dyslexic respondent's case is the following. In high school, teachers put a strong emphasis on helping students with learning disabilities. The newly enrolled students completed a learning disorder test, and depending on their results, teachers offered the students the opportunity to attend a weekly development lesson, and continuously monitored their development and supported their studies. In contrast, in higher education, after telling his problem to his teacher, the teacher surprised and tell the student to learn more diligently and did not take the subject's learning disorder into account during the exams.

Thus, in the case of teachers, their work is of paramount importance in both public education and higher education. In public education, teachers have an important role in recognizing the specific educational needs of a child and how they relate to, support, motivate the pupil to move forward and provide them with opportunities for development within the school framework. In higher education, teachers' attitudes towards students with disabilities are also strongly emphasized, with the adoption of difficulties and the attitudes attached to them being of paramount importance.

3.3 Other students' attitudes

In the case of successful respondents, the following trend can be seen when examining different areas of education. Leaving the kindergarten in the primary school reports negative experiences - with one or two exceptions - but the environment has become more and more accepting on the higher steps of the educational system. The fewest problems were found in higher education, which were described as welcoming and friendly.

It can be said that successful students were able to fit into other students more easily, finding their friends easier despite the initial difficulties.

A high school community, based on the report of a dyslexic male subject, stands out where it was natural for students at school to have difficulties. This can be assumed to have

a great role of how the school managing learning disorder (taking the above-mentioned test and a developing lesson).

In contrast to our successful respondents, less successful subjects reported having difficulty to integrating on each educational scene, and even if they were still accepted by other students in primary school, the situation in the secondary school deteriorated dramatically.

The case of a subject with autism spectrum disorder is particularly shocking. In primary school, he had to go to the periphery early on, he felt terrified. He then moved to a special institution but did not experience any improvement in this institution.

"It turned out that being with kids with disabilities is the exact same as being with the average kids." (27 / M / Autism Spectrum Disorder).

Later he went to college because of the distance between his home and the institution, but there were atrocities that caused him serious psychological symptoms. However, there is an upward trend in his career, since he reports on his time spent in a training and years of higher education, with much less conflict. He still felt a deficiency of not knowing what to do to make friends, but he already sees school and workplace as good a place to make friends.

Thus, the attitude of other students greatly determines its retaining power, which has a particular impact on the motivation and effectiveness of students with disabilities.

3.4 Attending higher education

In terms of prior knowledge of higher education, there was no difference between subjects who were successful or less successful, and each reported that they had little information on higher education.

However, the results are different in the circumstances of the application. Successful students, with one exception, were all motivated by further education from their early school years. Only one of them did not want to go to higher education, but he was encouraged by his teachers.

All of our successful interviewees applied to higher education without interrupting their study time, so after graduation they immediately entered higher education. For most of them, there was a longer period of reflection than two respondents, the visually impaired interviewee, who definitely imagined her future in the field of special education and one of our dyslexic male interviewees, who continued to choose the musical career as the same of his earlier music studies. All of them took into account their own abilities and interest in selecting the appropriate degree program.

In the case of less successful respondents, the choice of institutions was less conscious. It was a great challenge for our respondent with dyscalculia to choose from. He did

not find any training that was appropriate to his interests, and our other respondent (dyslexic) did not choose according to his own interests.

The case of our subject with autism spectrum disorder is somewhat different from the others, because in his case the parental control was stronger in terms of choice.

Thus, in the case of applications for higher education, the appropriate awareness of the choice of profession is highlighted on the basis of reports, especially with regard to the ability and interest. However, the communication of higher education institutions to students with disabilities did not prove to be an influencing factor. On the basis of what they said, the subjects did not get information about equal opportunities in higher education and about the university life itself.

3.5 Success in studies

We can say about our successful respondents that they describe themselves as basically medium and good learners, remembering public education. At first, they mentioned themselves as a good learner and formulated that good results were among their parents' expectations. However, in higher education, they are already reporting a deterioration in their average, and they thought it was more important to complete the subjects than the good results.

In public education, there were competitions, for example, one of our hearing-impaired respondents were successful in sports competitions.

The case of one of our dyslexic respondents shows an interesting picture, because after two years of development in primary school his teachers told that he had "outgrown" his dyslexia, he did not need further development. However, his results did not show any improvement, and at the beginning of high school he was confronted with the fact that his learning disabilities still exist. He reported on the results of the development lesson in high school that he did not contribute to the development of his abilities and achievements, but to change his way of thinking, his attitude to the subject learned and his own abilities, which in turn was a great development.

We can report similar results for subjects with less successful studies. In their case, however, the deterioration of learning outcomes occurred sooner.

Our case of respondent with dyscalculia is very noticeable, because the problem was discovered very late. In the lower section of primary school, he describes himself as excellent, mentions only mathematics as difficulty, but then his results gradually deteriorated, while at the end of high school he had to repeat a year because of his results of mathematics. Thus, teachers only suggested to him in the last year of high school to see himself with an expert.

3.6 Helping services during school years

All in all, in the case of each of our subjects, it can be said that teachers in the public education typically provided more help to use the opportunities. They suggested the different options for the students, but we must add that the teachers in the public education typically knew about the difficulties of the students. However, when entering higher education, students were only divided in very few cases by their teachers.

Our respondents who have successfully completed their studies are characterized by the fact that they are most often asked to replace the oral / written exam, and to apply for a complete or complete exemption from the language exam. However, those who take advantage of this have typically benefited from similar relief in public education. One of our hearing-impaired respondents was given the opportunity to replace a difficult subject with a freely chosen subject in order to obtain a degree.

For a dyslexic male respondent, there is a longer process of taking advantage of the opportunities. Gradually, he used various discounts during his studies. In high school, he was initially exempted from literary and written assignments, and later he received relief from mathematics, and finally he was exempt from foreign language, so he was also exempt from passing the final examination. Although he took advantage of the language exam in higher education, he felt that it was no longer necessary for his instructors to know about his problem, so he only applied for an exemption from the language exam in order to obtain a diploma, otherwise he did not apply for help.

Respondents with less successful studies did not have sufficient information on the services available in higher education. Though the problem of our respondent with dyslexia came up late, they turned to an expert at the suggestion of their teachers, and thus got exemption from mathematics.

A student with autism spectrum disorder got a student who would have been in charge of his administration, but our subject did not take advantage of these opportunities, rather he sought help when he got lost in the building. From this case we can conclude that the information on the filter of similar students is different, so they should be given more targeted help in response to the student's request for help.

In the case of access to services, therefore, it is of crucial importance that the institution has sufficient information on students with disabilities, which is not only an important factor in public education, but also in years of higher education. It has been shown that the different characteristics of different disabilities should be taken into account and adapted to their needs.

4 Summary

The aim of our research was to identify the supporting factors that help students with disabilities and learning difficulties to achieve a successful study path and graduation.

Analyzing qualitative data, we have identified those supportive forces that have an impact on students' learning paths. These factors include the impact of the family, teachers and other students, and the conditions for applying for higher education.

For our hypotheses, we received the following results:

Our first hypothesis can be confirmed by the fact that the existence of institutionalized services and the opportunities it offers are not sufficient in themselves to enable the pupils concerned to successfully complete their studies, although they make a major contribution to a successful career.

Our second hypothesis has also been confirmed by the interview study, according to which the supporting factors have a decisive influence already in the early stages of life, at the beginning of the school career.

So, we got the following answers to our research questions:

The most frequently used services are the partial or total exemption of language examinations, or the easing of the language examinations and the substitutability of the written and oral examinations according to the student's abilities in relation to the customization of the exams.

Equal opportunities and services available in higher education do not determine career choice, because according to the answers the students had very little information about higher education at the time of admission, and among the little information available there were no discounts available in higher education.

To sum up, it can be said that there are very sharp differences between students who have successfully completed a successful and less successful study path, especially with regard to the supporting background. The presence of supporting forces is able to compensate for the disadvantages arising from the capabilities, and in the case of students with disabilities, these factors are especially needed.

The generalization of research results is constrained by the difficult accessibility of the target group and the incomplete coverage of databases due to the fact that not all stakeholders register as disabled students.

Our results also suggest the possibility of further research.

The topic can be examined not only from the point of view of students with disabilities and learning difficulties, but also from the point of view of the majority students and from the point of view of co-ordinators working in higher education and equal opportunities workers. These results can make the results obtained by disabled students more sophisticated.

It is advisable to examine the methods and opinions of employees of higher education organizations assisting students with disabilities about the effectiveness of their work for

equal opportunities, as well as which types of disabilities are the cases, grades, circumstances when the requested discount can be awarded to students, in which cases they require the most help.

In the case of majority students, the aim of the research can be to examine how and in what quality information is provided to enable students with disabilities to be created, and to what extent they accept disabilities and their views on how they can help equal opportunities for the students concerned. Does the extent and quality of their information affect the effectiveness of creating job opportunities for students with disabilities.

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